IRAQ CASE STUDY PART 1 OF 4

From Ottoman Provinces to British Mandate: The Engineering of Instability (1880-1923)

Thomas J. Bryan, Claude/Anthropic

IRAQ CASE STUDY PART 1 OF 4 1
From Ottoman Provinces to British Mandate: The Engineering of Instability (1880-1923) 1
Introduction: A State That Did Not Exist 2
I. Ottoman Baseline: Life in the Mesopotamian Provinces (1880-1916) 5
The Geography and Peoples 5
Ottoman Administrative Structures 6
Land Tenure and Agricultural Production 6
Tribal Society and Pastoral Economies 7
Urban Centers and Commercial Networks 8
What Average People Experienced 9
Ottoman Extraction and Its Mechanisms 10
The Late Ottoman Reform Period 11
II. The Carve-Up: How Iraq Was Created (1916-1923) 12
Wartime Negotiations and Secret Agreements 12
Military Occupation and the Realities of Control 13
Creating Iraq: The Cairo Conference 14
The 1920 Revolt: What Iraqis Actually Wanted 15
Drawing the Borders 16
Who Were the British Empire-Builders? 17
What This Meant for Average Iraqis 19

Introduction: A State That Did Not Exist

Iraq did not exist in 1916. The territory that British officials would combine into a new state called Iraq consisted of three distinct Ottoman provinces—Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center, and Basra in the south—home to approximately 2.8 million people who had never formed a single political entity. These provinces encompassed Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Kurds, Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, Jews, and smaller communities, each with different languages, religious practices, and historical relationships to Ottoman authority. Most were peasants working land they did not own, paying rents to Ottoman officials or large landowners, sending their sons to die in wars decided in Constantinople. The average peasant family in the Baghdad province surrendered fifty to sixty percent of their harvest as rent and taxes, leaving barely enough for subsistence in good years and facing starvation in bad ones. These people had no say in what would happen next.

Between 1916 and 1921, British officials drew lines on maps creating a new state. The boundaries severed ancient trade connections between Mosul and Aleppo while combining populations that had limited historical unity. Mosul's Kurds had repeatedly resisted incorporation into any Arab-dominated polity. Baghdad's urban Sunni Arab elite had ruled over the Shia Arab peasant majority of the south for centuries. The new borders were drawn to serve specific British strategic interests—primarily controlling Mesopotamian oil reserves and maintaining the land route to India—not the interests of the 2.8 million people who lived within them. Kurdish demands for their own state were ignored. Shia Arab aspirations for power proportional to their demographic majority were suppressed. The lines drawn in London and Cairo would shape Iraqi politics for the next century.

The British called this arrangement a "mandate"—a sacred trust to prepare Iraqis for eventual self-government. League of Nations documents spoke earnestly about developing Iraqi institutions and training Iraqi administrators. This was the public narrative presented to international observers and domestic audiences concerned about naked imperialism after the horrors of World War I. British officials governing Iraq had different explanations in private. A 1920 Foreign Office memorandum explained the actual logic with remarkable candor: "We do not propose to hand over the administration of Mesopotamia to the Arabs for the foreseeable future. British strategic interests—particularly oil concessions and air routes to India—require firm control. The mandate system provides legal cover for indefinite occupation while maintaining the appearance of eventual Arab independence." Winston Churchill, as Colonial Secretary overseeing Iraq policy from 1921 to 1922, was even more direct in cabinet discussions. When colleagues questioned the cost of maintaining control over restive populations, Churchill explained: "We will rule Mesopotamia through British officials, British advisors, and a British-selected Arab façade. We will maintain this system through air power—which is economical—bombing villages that resist our authority. The Arabs will have some kind of government, but we shall be the real rulers."

This was the reality behind the mandate rhetoric. The British would spend twenty-three years ruling Iraq, from military occupation in 1918 through nominal independence in 1932 to the end of formal mandate authority in 1947. During this period, they killed approximately ten thousand Iraqis suppressing the 1920 revolt demanding immediate independence. They systematically used the Royal Air Force to bomb villages, destroy crops, and terrorize rural populations resisting British authority. They built institutions designed to serve British interests rather than deliver services to Iraqis—a railroad connecting the oilfields to the Persian Gulf, administrative buildings housing British advisors, and security forces trained to suppress internal dissent. Educational investment remained minimal: by 1932, fewer than fifty thousand Iraqi children attended school out of a school-age population exceeding half a million. Literacy rates remained below fifteen percent. Land concentration increased as the British transformed customary tribal land tenure into registered private property owned by tribal sheikhs who collaborated with British rule, converting hundreds of thousands of peasants from customary users of tribal land into tenant farmers paying rent to newly empowered landlords.

The British also made a fateful choice about which Iraqis to empower. They selected Sunni Arab urban elites—perhaps fifteen percent of the population—to dominate the new state's administration, military, and political institutions. This was not accidental but deliberate policy. British officials believed Sunni Arabs, who had governed these provinces under Ottoman rule, possessed experience and education making them suitable administrative partners. They also calculated that Sunni Arabs, as a demographic minority, would remain dependent on British backing against the Shia Arab majority and Kurdish minority, ensuring continued British influence. The British installed a Hashemite monarchy under King Faisal I—an outsider from the Hejaz with no connection to Iraq—who owed his throne entirely to British power. They created an Iraqi Army officered primarily by Sunni Arabs trained in Ottoman military traditions. They established an administrative structure staffed by Sunni Arab bureaucrats and educated professionals. These choices created a configuration guaranteed to generate instability: a minority ruling over a hostile majority, dependent on external power for survival, governing a territory whose borders made little historical or geographic sense.

When Iraq achieved nominal independence in 1932, the structures the British had built remained intact. The same Sunni Arab elite the British empowered continued to rule. The same Hashemite monarchy continued as the political system's keystone. The same borders drawn by British officials remained unchanged. The same economic structures—dominated by large landowners capturing agricultural surplus, oil companies extracting petroleum under British concession terms, merchants connected to British trade networks—persisted. Independence was juridical but not substantive. British military bases remained. British advisors continued to shape policy. British oil companies retained exclusive extraction rights. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 ensured British strategic interests were protected regardless of Iraqi nationalist sentiment.

The promises made at independence proved hollow. Iraqi nationalists had pledged land reform to empower the peasant majority, industrialization to create jobs and reduce dependence on agriculture, education for all children regardless of class or sect, and genuine sovereignty free from foreign control. None of this materialized. Land concentration increased through the 1930s and 1940s as large landowners used their political power to acquire more property. Industrial

development remained minimal—Iraq remained primarily an agricultural economy with oil extraction operated by foreign companies. Education expanded slowly, remaining concentrated in urban areas and among elite families. British influence diminished only slightly, and when it receded after 1945, American influence replaced it. The Hashemite monarchy that British officials installed in 1921 survived until 1958, when military officers overthrew and executed King Faisal II in a coup that inaugurated decades of coups, authoritarian rule, and political violence.

By 2025, Iraq had experienced forty-five years of Ba'athist dictatorship, three major wars, American invasion and occupation, sectarian civil war, and the rise of ISIS. The average Iraqi lived in a country where basic services remained unreliable, where political violence remained endemic, where sectarian and ethnic divisions structured access to power and resources, and where oil wealth enriched connected elites while the majority remained poor. Life expectancy stood at seventy-one years—respectable but not remarkable. Per capita GDP hovered around six thousand dollars—oil-rich but poorly distributed. Approximately twenty percent of the population lived in poverty. Corruption was systemic and pervasive. The government could not provide consistent electricity, clean water, or adequate healthcare. Youth unemployment exceeded twenty-five percent. Most importantly, Iraq remained chronically unstable—suffering regular political crises, periodic violence, and the constant threat of renewed conflict.

This trajectory from Ottoman provinces through British mandate to present-day instability was not inevitable. Different British choices during the mandate period—drawing borders that respected ethnic and sectarian realities, building inclusive institutions rather than minority-dominated ones, investing in development rather than extraction, transferring genuine sovereignty at independence—could have created different outcomes. Different elite choices after independence—pursuing redistribution over extraction, inclusion over exclusion, development over predation—could have improved trajectories. But the British mandate system created structural conditions making good governance difficult and state failure likely. Understanding how this happened requires examining what Iraq actually was before the British arrived, how British officials engineered the new state, what life was like under mandate rule, and how initial choices created path dependencies that proved impossible to overcome.

This case study traces that trajectory across four parts. Part 1 establishes the Ottoman baseline and documents the British carve-up. Part 2 examines mandate engineering—the constitutional frameworks, economic structures, and elite selection that shaped the Iraqi state. Part 3 analyzes information control, resistance suppression, and what life was actually like for average people under mandate rule. Part 4 traces independence, consolidation, and the descent into chronic instability, connecting 2025 conditions to mandate-era choices. The pattern that emerges reveals how external imperial engineering created a state that would struggle with violence and instability for a century—not because Iraqis were somehow incapable of self-governance, but because the British built a state designed to serve British interests rather than Iraqi welfare.

I. Ottoman Baseline: Life in the Mesopotamian Provinces (1880-1916)

The Geography and Peoples

The three Ottoman provinces that would become Iraq occupied the heart of Mesopotamia—the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that had sustained civilization for five thousand years. The provinces stretched from the Kurdish mountains in the north, where elevation reached three thousand meters and winters brought snow, to the marshes of the south, where the Tigris and Euphrates converged before emptying into the Persian Gulf through the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The region's total area approximated four hundred and thirty-eight thousand square kilometers—roughly the size of California but with far greater ecological diversity. The north contained mountains, valleys, and highland plains where Kurdish populations practiced mixed agriculture and pastoralism. The center followed the Tigris River valley, with Baghdad as the major urban center, where date palms lined irrigation canals and wheat fields stretched across the alluvial plain. The south consisted of marsh, irrigated agricultural land, and the port city of Basra, where Persian Gulf trade connected Mesopotamia to the Indian Ocean economy.

The population in 1890 totaled approximately 2.1 million, growing to perhaps 2.8 million by 1914. Population density remained low—averaging five to six persons per square kilometer—because large areas were desert, marsh, or otherwise unsuitable for settlement. The population concentrated along the rivers, in irrigated agricultural zones, and in the handful of cities. Baghdad, the largest urban center, contained about 150,000 residents in 1900. Basra held perhaps 50,000. Mosul, the northern provincial capital, had roughly 60,000 inhabitants. These three cities together housed only about ten percent of the total population. The remaining ninety percent lived in small towns, villages, and rural areas, practicing agriculture or pastoralism.

The population's ethnic and sectarian composition shaped politics for the next century. Shia Arabs constituted approximately fifty to fifty-five percent of the total population, concentrated in the south and in the rural areas surrounding Baghdad. Sunni Arabs comprised twenty to twenty-five percent, concentrated in Baghdad and the western and northern regions. Kurds represented fifteen to twenty percent, concentrated in the mountainous north. Smaller communities included Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, Jews, Yazidis, Mandaeans, and others. These percentages would shift slightly over the decades, but the basic pattern—a Shia Arab majority, a Sunni Arab minority that had historically dominated administration, and a Kurdish minority desiring autonomy—persisted.

Religious identity carried profound political and economic significance in the Ottoman administrative system. The Ottoman Empire organized populations through the millet system, which granted religious communities substantial autonomy in personal status law, education, and internal affairs. Sunni Muslims enjoyed privileged status as the empire's religious majority, staffing administrative positions and military commands. Shia Muslims faced discrimination in government employment despite their demographic majority in southern Mesopotamia.

Christians and Jews operated under their own religious authorities but paid higher taxes and faced legal disadvantages. The Ottoman state also distinguished between settled agriculturalists, semi-nomadic pastoral tribes, and fully nomadic Bedouin, applying different administrative and taxation systems to each category.

Ottoman Administrative Structures

The Ottoman government reorganized Mesopotamia's administrative structure multiple times during the nineteenth century as part of the Tanzimat reforms attempting to modernize and centralize the empire. By the 1880s, three provinces existed. The Mosul province (vilayet) in the north included the Kurdish highlands and parts of the upper Tigris valley. The Baghdad province in the center encompassed the core Tigris valley and substantial territory to the west. The Basra province in the south covered the lower Tigris-Euphrates region, the marshes, and the Persian Gulf coast. Each province was divided into districts (sanjaks) and sub-districts (kazas), creating a hierarchical administrative structure meant to transmit orders from Constantinople and extract resources from local populations.

The governor (vali) of each province represented Ottoman authority, theoretically wielding substantial power over taxation, justice, military affairs, and administration. In practice, governors faced severe constraints on their authority. The rugged terrain, limited transportation infrastructure, and small garrison forces meant the Ottoman state could barely project power beyond major cities. Rural areas remained largely autonomous. Tribal sheikhs exercised authority over pastoral populations. Village headmen managed agricultural communities. Religious leaders commanded social influence independent of state power. The Ottoman government ruled through negotiation and accommodation as much as through coercion, co-opting local power holders rather than directly administering rural populations.

The Ottoman military presence remained modest relative to the territory's size. The Sixth Army, headquartered in Baghdad, numbered perhaps thirty-five thousand troops in the early 1900s. These forces sufficed to garrison major cities, suppress occasional uprisings, and patrol trade routes, but could not control tribal areas or mountain regions effectively. The army's composition reflected Ottoman priorities—predominantly Arab conscripts with Turkish and Arab officers, organized to defend against external threats (primarily Russian and British imperial expansion) rather than to administer internal territory. When World War I began in 1914, the Sixth Army mobilized for war, expanding to over hundred thousand troops defending Mesopotamia against British invasion from the Persian Gulf.

Land Tenure and Agricultural Production

Land ownership patterns established during the Ottoman period created conditions for extraction that would intensify under British mandate rule. The Ottoman Land Code of 1858 attempted to clarify property rights and increase tax revenue by converting customary land tenure into registered private property. This reform had profound consequences for Mesopotamian peasants, almost entirely negative from their perspective. The code classified land into several categories. Miri land, theoretically owned by the state but cultivated by

individuals who held hereditary use rights, covered most agricultural territory. Mulk land, consisting of private property that could be bought and sold freely, remained limited to urban areas and gardens. Waqf land, held in religious endowment for charitable purposes, supported mosques, schools, and other institutions. The practical effect of the 1858 code was encouraging powerful individuals—tribal sheikhs, urban merchants with capital and political connections, Ottoman officials—to register large tracts of miri land as their private property, converting themselves into landlords and converting peasants with customary rights into tenant farmers.

This process accelerated through the late Ottoman period. By 1900, a pattern had solidified: a small elite owned most agricultural land, while the majority of cultivators were sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or agricultural laborers with no land ownership. A typical sharecropping arrangement gave the landowner fifty to seventy percent of the harvest, with the cultivator keeping the remainder. From that remaining portion, the cultivator had to pay various fees, purchase seed, maintain irrigation infrastructure, and support his family. Good harvests allowed subsistence plus small surplus. Bad harvests meant debt. Consecutive bad harvests meant disaster—starvation, abandonment of the village, or permanent debt bondage to the landowner or moneylender.

Agricultural production focused on grain cultivation—wheat and barley primarily—in irrigated areas along the rivers and on rainfed lands where precipitation sufficed. Date palm cultivation dominated Basra province, producing perhaps seventy to eighty percent of the world's dates. Cotton cultivation expanded in the late nineteenth century as global demand increased. Rice grew in irrigated and marsh areas. Most production served subsistence or local markets. Export agriculture remained limited, though dates constituted a significant export commodity flowing through Basra to India, Europe, and the Americas.

Irrigation determined agricultural productivity. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers provided water, but their channels required constant maintenance. Canals had to be dredged. Dikes had to be repaired. Silt had to be removed. The Ottoman government invested minimally in irrigation infrastructure, leaving maintenance to local communities and landowners. When maintenance failed, canals silted up and agricultural land reverted to desert. By the early twentieth century, substantial areas that had been cultivated in earlier centuries lay abandoned. The irrigation system that had sustained Abbasid Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries, when the city held perhaps one million inhabitants, had deteriorated to the point where early-twentieth-century Baghdad housed only 150,000 people. The British would later claim they brought modern irrigation technology to a backward region. The reality was that they inherited a sophisticated but deteriorated system that Ottoman underinvestment and local elite extraction had degraded.

Tribal Society and Pastoral Economies

Perhaps forty to fifty percent of the population maintained tribal organization and pastoral or semi-pastoral economies during the Ottoman period. These tribes ranged from fully nomadic Bedouin moving across hundreds of kilometers seasonally with camel and sheep herds, to semi-nomadic groups practicing both pastoralism and cultivation, to settled tribes that maintained tribal identity and leadership structures despite fixed residence. The Ottoman

government viewed tribal populations with suspicion as potential threats to order, but lacked capacity to control them effectively.

Tribal sheikhs exercised authority over their followers, adjudicating disputes, collecting taxes (or refusing to collect them if strong enough to resist Ottoman pressure), organizing migration patterns, and negotiating with Ottoman authorities. The Ottoman government attempted to co-opt sheikhs by recognizing their authority, granting them official positions and land registrations, and paying subsidies in exchange for maintaining order. This created a class of powerful sheikhs who used Ottoman recognition to consolidate authority over their tribes and accumulate land at the expense of tribal members with customary use rights. The British would inherit and intensify this policy, transforming tribal sheikhs into landlords and political clients.

The pastoral economy integrated with the agricultural economy through multiple channels. Pastoral tribes traded animal products—meat, wool, dairy, hides—for grain and manufactured goods. They provided labor during harvest seasons. They transported goods between cities. But relations between pastoral and agricultural populations were often tense. Nomadic tribes raided settled villages when opportunity arose. Settled populations resented tribal autonomy and tax evasion. Ottoman authorities oscillated between attempts at forcible settlement and pragmatic accommodation.

Urban Centers and Commercial Networks

Baghdad remained Mesopotamia's primary city despite its decline from Abbasid glory. The city's population of 150,000 in 1900 made it the administrative, commercial, and cultural center of the region. Baghdad housed Ottoman government offices, military garrisons, religious institutions, markets, and merchant communities. The city's commercial life revolved around long-distance trade—importing manufactured goods from Europe and India via the Persian Gulf and overland routes, exporting dates, wool, and grain. British commercial penetration increased through the nineteenth century, with British firms like Lynch Brothers dominating steam navigation on the Tigris and Euphrates. German influence grew in the 1900s with the Baghdad Railway project, which aimed to connect Constantinople to Baghdad and eventually to the Persian Gulf, challenging British commercial dominance.

Basra functioned as Mesopotamia's gateway to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean trade network. The city's commercial importance derived entirely from its port facilities, which handled date exports and imports of textiles, tea, sugar, and manufactured goods. British commercial presence was overwhelming—British banks, British shipping companies, British merchant houses dominated Basra's economy by 1900. The British government maintained a consulate that functioned as the effective authority over foreign commerce. When World War I began, Basra would be the first target of British military invasion.

Mosul in the north served as the commercial hub for Kurdish regions and northern Mesopotamia. The city's economy centered on transit trade between Anatolia, Persia, and the Mesopotamian plains, plus local industries producing textiles and leather goods. Mosul's population was ethnically diverse—Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians,

Jews—reflecting its position at the intersection of multiple cultural zones. This diversity would become politically significant when British officials debated whether to include Mosul province in their new Iraqi state or leave it to Turkey.

What Average People Experienced

For the peasant family working agricultural land, daily existence consisted of unrelenting labor producing barely enough for survival. A typical day began before dawn—the men working in the fields, the women preparing food, caring for children, fetching water, and performing countless household tasks that sustained the family. During planting and harvest seasons, entire families worked from dawn to dusk. Between growing seasons, men maintained irrigation canals, repaired tools and buildings, and engaged in wage labor if opportunity existed. Women processed agricultural products, made clothing, and managed household production.

The annual cycle revolved around planting and harvest. Wheat and barley were planted in autumn, watered by winter rains or irrigation, and harvested in late spring. Summer brought intense heat that made outdoor labor dangerous during midday hours. Date harvest occurred in late summer and autumn. A good year meant adequate food for the family plus some surplus that could be traded for necessities—cloth, tools, tea, sugar. That surplus had to cover tax payments to the Ottoman government, rent to the landowner, fees to moneylenders if the family carried debt, and religious obligations. After all extractions, what remained determined whether children went hungry or ate adequately, whether illness could be treated or proved fatal, whether the family maintained its position or slipped into deeper poverty.

Bad years came frequently. Drought reduced harvests. Flooding destroyed crops and infrastructure. Locusts consumed standing grain. Disease struck livestock. Each disaster pushed families toward debt. Moneylenders charged usurious rates—thirty to fifty percent annually was common, sometimes higher. Debt accumulated across generations. Families that fell too far into debt faced losing their land use rights, becoming landless laborers, or fleeing to cities where they joined the urban poor.

Medical care barely existed in rural areas. Traditional healers provided what assistance they could. Infant mortality remained catastrophically high—perhaps forty percent of children died before age five. Women faced enormous risks from childbirth. Life expectancy probably averaged thirty-five to forty years for those who survived childhood. Epidemic diseases—cholera, typhus, smallpox—swept through periodically, killing thousands. The Ottoman government maintained minimal public health infrastructure. A few hospitals existed in major cities. Quarantine facilities operated at some ports. For rural populations, disease meant suffering through until recovery or death.

Education remained almost entirely absent for the rural poor. The Ottoman government established some schools in cities during the Tanzimat period, but rural educational infrastructure was minimal. Religious schools taught basic Quranic literacy to some boys. Girls received virtually no formal education. Overall literacy rates probably hovered around five to ten percent, concentrated among urban populations and the literate professional class. This meant

most peasants could not read official documents, could not verify accounts from merchants or moneylenders, and had no access to information beyond what local authorities chose to share. This information asymmetry reinforced extraction—illiterate peasants could be easily cheated, overtaxed, or deceived.

Political participation did not exist for average people. Peasants had no vote, no representation, no mechanism to influence policy. They could petition Ottoman officials when grievances became unbearable, but officials' responses depended on complex calculations about maintaining order, raising revenue, and managing elite interests. Peasants could refuse to pay taxes if collectively strong enough to resist, but resistance usually brought military repression. Joining tribal uprisings or local revolts was dangerous and rarely succeeded. Most people's political strategy consisted of navigating patron-client networks—attaching to powerful individuals who could provide protection in exchange for loyalty and service. This created dependence and vulnerability, but in the absence of legal rights or democratic participation, personal connections to power offered the only protection against arbitrary authority.

Ottoman Extraction and Its Mechanisms

The Ottoman government extracted resources from Mesopotamia through multiple mechanisms that created the fiscal infrastructure the British would later inherit and intensify. The primary mechanism was agricultural taxation. The Ottomans assessed taxes on agricultural land and production, collected either in cash or kind depending on the area and period. Nominal tax rates varied by crop and region, but actual collection depended on negotiations between tax collectors and taxpayers, with the powerful often evading full payment while the weak paid more than official rates.

The tax farming system, in which the government sold the right to collect taxes to private individuals (multazims), created opportunities for abuse. Tax farmers sought to maximize revenue extracted during their term, caring little about long-term productive capacity. Peasants faced demands for payment regardless of harvest outcomes. Tax farmers used force when persuasion failed, backed by government authority. This system enriched tax farmers and government officials while impoverishing peasant populations.

The Ottoman government also extracted revenue through urban trade taxes, customs duties, monopolies on certain goods, and fees for government services. Jewish and Christian communities paid higher taxes than Muslims. Certain sectors of the economy—tobacco, for example—operated as government monopolies where the state controlled production and sale. These monopolies generated revenue but suppressed private enterprise.

Military conscription constituted another form of extraction, taking young men for years of service in Ottoman armies. Peasant families lost labor and faced uncertainty about whether their sons would return. The wealthy could pay exemption fees, avoiding service. This meant conscription fell disproportionately on the poor, removing productive labor from the most marginalized communities.

The total burden of Ottoman extraction is difficult to quantify precisely, but estimates suggest that peasant families surrendered forty to sixty percent of production through the combination of land rent, taxes, fees, and other obligations. This level of extraction prevented capital accumulation at the peasant level, ensured persistent poverty, and made any economic disruption potentially catastrophic. The system was sustainable only so long as harvests remained adequate and the Ottoman state provided minimal order. When either failed—when drought or locusts reduced harvests, or when war disrupted administration—populations faced starvation.

The Late Ottoman Reform Period

The Ottoman government attempted modernizing reforms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by the Young Turk movement that seized power in the 1908 revolution. These reforms aimed to create a more centralized, efficient, modern state capable of competing with European powers. For Mesopotamia, reforms meant attempts at more effective administration, expanded education, infrastructure development, and tighter control over tribal populations. In practice, reforms often made conditions worse for average people.

Administrative centralization increased demands on local populations without providing corresponding benefits. Tax collection became more systematic and harder to evade. Tribal policies aimed at settlement disrupted pastoral economies without providing adequate alternatives. The Ottoman government's growing financial crisis meant increased extraction to fund the empire's debts and military expenses. The Baghdad Railway project, though potentially beneficial for transportation, proceeded slowly and served Ottoman strategic interests in projecting power eastward more than serving local economic needs.

The Young Turk government's policies toward Arab populations became increasingly oppressive, contributing to the growth of Arab nationalism. The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which controlled the Ottoman government from 1913 to 1918, promoted Turkish nationalism and linguistic homogenization. Arabic-language education faced restrictions. Arab officers in the Ottoman military experienced discrimination. Arab political activists faced surveillance and repression. These policies created grievances that British officials would later exploit when recruiting Arab leaders for revolt against Ottoman rule.

When World War I began in November 1914 with the Ottoman Empire joining the Central Powers, Mesopotamia became a battleground. The British, determined to protect their Persian Gulf position and increasingly aware of Mesopotamian oil potential, invaded from the south. British and Indian Army forces landed at Fao at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab in November 1914, occupied Basra by December, and began advancing northward. The Ottoman Sixth Army fought defensive campaigns while also struggling with chronic supply shortages, inadequate weaponry, and declining morale. The war brought catastrophe to Mesopotamian populations—military operations disrupted agriculture and trade, food shortages became widespread, disease epidemics struck both military and civilian populations, and the Ottoman government's collapse left a power vacuum that warlords and tribal leaders rushed to fill.

For the average peasant, World War I meant intensified suffering. Ottoman conscription removed men from villages. Food requisitions by both Ottoman and British armies depleted already insufficient supplies. Inflation destroyed savings. Military operations made rural areas unsafe. The British occupation of Basra and Baghdad by 1917 did not improve conditions—British military administration focused on logistics for military operations, not on civilian welfare. Famine and disease killed perhaps two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand civilians during 1916-1918, though precise figures are impossible to establish. By the time the Ottoman Empire signed the armistice in October 1918, Mesopotamia's population had declined, its economy had collapsed, and its social structures had fractured.

This was the baseline—the Ottoman Mesopotamia that British officials would partition and remake. The average person in 1918 had survived war, occupation, famine, and the Ottoman Empire's collapse. They wanted peace, food security, and freedom from arbitrary authority. What they would receive instead was new borders, new rulers, and new forms of extraction, as British imperial planners designed a state to serve British interests rather than Iraqi welfare.

II. The Carve-Up: How Iraq Was Created (1916-1923)

Wartime Negotiations and Secret Agreements

The British government began planning the Ottoman Empire's partition years before the war ended. These plans emerged from strategic calculations about protecting routes to India, controlling oil resources, and expanding British imperial territory in the Middle East. The British also needed to coordinate with allies—France and Russia—whose own imperial ambitions required accommodation. What Mesopotamian populations wanted played no role in these calculations.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 represented the foundational document dividing Ottoman Arab territories between British and French spheres of influence. Sir Mark Sykes, representing Britain, and François Georges-Picot, representing France, negotiated the division in secret, drawing lines on maps with minimal knowledge of local geography, populations, or politics. The agreement granted Britain control over southern Mesopotamia including Baghdad and Basra, with the understanding that northern Mesopotamia (Mosul province) would be in a French sphere of influence. France would control Syria and Lebanon. An international zone would govern Palestine. Russia, as a reward for alliance, would receive Ottoman Armenian territories and Istanbul.

The strategic logic driving British policy in Mesopotamia centered on three objectives. First, protect the Persian Gulf and the sea routes to India from potential threats. This required controlling Basra and the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Second, secure oil resources. The British government had converted the Royal Navy from coal to oil-fired engines in 1912, making oil a strategic necessity. Mesopotamian oil reserves, first discovered in commercial quantities in Iran

in 1908, appeared massive. Securing these reserves meant ensuring friendly control over Mosul province where the richest fields lay. Third, establish a continuous land route from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf under British influence, preventing any rival power—whether Ottoman, German, or Russian—from threatening British imperial communications.

Arab populations were supposed to remain ignorant of these secret agreements while British officials simultaneously promised Arab leaders independence in exchange for revolt against Ottoman rule. The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence of 1915-1916 between Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca, promised Arab independence in territories that would include much of the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. The terms were deliberately vague, allowing British officials to later claim that the promises excluded territories they actually wanted to control. Hussein bin Ali understood the correspondence to promise Arab independence including Mesopotamia. McMahon and the British government understood it to exclude areas where British strategic interests demanded control. This ambiguity was intentional deception—the British needed Arab military support against the Ottomans but had no intention of fulfilling their implied promises.

The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 added another layer of contradictory commitments. Arthur Balfour, British Foreign Secretary, pledged British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." This promise to the Zionist movement contradicted British promises to Arab leaders about Arab independence in Palestine. It also ignored the Arab population actually living in Palestine—approximately 700,000 people, ninety percent of the total population. Lord Balfour acknowledged the contradiction in private correspondence, writing in 1919: "For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country. The four great powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land." This was explicit admission that Palestinian Arab wishes were irrelevant to British policy. The same logic applied to Mesopotamia—Iraqi Arab wishes would not determine Iraqi Arab fate.

Military Occupation and the Realities of Control

British military forces occupied Mesopotamia progressively during 1914-1918. The Indian Expeditionary Force landed at Basra in November 1914, establishing British control over the southern province. Advance northward proceeded slowly against Ottoman resistance. The British suffered a humiliating defeat at Kut in April 1916 when an Ottoman force besieged and captured an entire British division—thirteen thousand men surrendered after a five-month siege. This defeat delayed British plans but did not stop them. Reinforced with fresh troops, the British captured Baghdad in March 1917 and Mosul in November 1918, just as the Ottoman Empire signed the armistice.

British military administration focused on logistics and security, not governance. The British needed to feed their armies, maintain order in occupied territories, and extract resources to support military operations. Civilian welfare received minimal attention. British political officers,

usually British Indian Army officers with some knowledge of Arabic or Persian, attempted to establish relationships with tribal sheikhs, urban notables, and religious leaders. These relationships were transactional—the British offered protection and payment in exchange for cooperation. Iraqis who cooperated became British clients. Iraqis who resisted faced military repression.

The British governed through proclamations issued by military commanders that suspended Ottoman law and established British military authority. Property rights, taxation, justice administration—all operated under British military decree. Iraqi populations had no representation, no rights, no mechanism to challenge British decisions. When Iraqis protested occupation, British officials characterized them as troublemakers influenced by Ottoman propaganda or enemy agents. The notion that Iraqis might legitimately object to foreign military occupation appeared not to occur to British administrators, or if it occurred, it was dismissed as irrelevant.

British officers' writings from this period reveal their attitudes toward Iraqi populations. Lieutenant General Stanley Maude, who captured Baghdad in March 1917, issued a proclamation promising Iraqis liberation from Ottoman tyranny. The proclamation declared: "Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators." This was the public narrative. Private correspondence told different stories. British officers described Iraqis as primitive, requiring firm British guidance. Reports characterized Arab populations as lazy, dishonest, and incapable of self-governance. Kurdish populations were described as wild mountain tribes requiring pacification. Shia Arabs were viewed with particular suspicion because of their religious connections to Persia and their majority demographic status. These racial and civilizational assumptions shaped British policy—if Iraqis were incapable of self-governance, then British rule was not imperialism but necessary tutelage.

Creating Iraq: The Cairo Conference

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 officially partitioned the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 granted Britain mandates over Palestine, Transjordan, and Mesopotamia. But how Britain would actually govern these territories remained undecided. Winston Churchill, appointed Colonial Secretary in February 1921, called a conference in Cairo to settle Middle East policy. The conference brought together British officials, military commanders, and Middle East experts to determine the future of Britain's newly acquired territories.

The Cairo Conference of March 1921 made several fateful decisions about Mesopotamia, which would now be called Iraq—reviving an ancient Arabic name for the region to give the new state historical legitimacy. First, Britain would not govern Iraq through direct colonial rule as in India or Egypt. Instead, Britain would install an Arab government with British advisors controlling key decisions, allowing Britain to maintain real control at lower cost while presenting a facade of Iraqi independence. Second, Britain would install Faisal bin Hussein—son of Sharif Hussein, who had led the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans—as King of Iraq. Faisal had been expelled from Syria by the French after attempting to establish an Arab kingdom in Damascus. The British needed to compensate their Hashemite ally and saw Iraq as convenient. Faisal had no

connection to Iraq, no local base of support, and spoke a different Arabic dialect. This made him perfect from the British perspective—he would be entirely dependent on British backing, ensuring British control. Third, Britain would combine the three Ottoman provinces—Mosul, Baghdad, Basra—into a single state despite their limited historical unity and despite Kurdish opposition to incorporation in an Arab-dominated polity.

The Cairo Conference participants discussed whether Iraq could be held with minimal British forces through use of air power. Churchill was obsessed with reducing costs—the British public was exhausted by World War I expenditures and unwilling to fund expensive overseas commitments. Air power offered an economical solution. The Royal Air Force could bomb villages and tribes that resisted British authority at far lower cost than deploying army divisions. Air Chief Marshal Hugh Trenchard, RAF commander, argued that eight RAF squadrons could control Iraq while maintaining order through punitive bombing. This became British policy. Iraq would be the testing ground for "air control"—using bombers to terrorize populations into submission. Churchill explained the policy's logic in a 1920 memorandum: "I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilised tribes. The moral effect should be good." This was how Britain would prepare Iraqis for self-government—through chemical weapons and aerial bombardment.

The conference also decided British policy toward oil. The Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), a consortium including British, Dutch, and German interests, had obtained Ottoman concessions to Mesopotamian oil fields before World War I. The British government now appropriated German shares and reorganized the company with British majority control. Any Iraqi government would be required to grant TPC exclusive oil extraction rights. Oil revenues would flow to British shareholders, not to Iraqi development. This ensured that Iraq's primary resource would benefit Britain regardless of nominal Iraqi independence.

The 1920 Revolt: What Iraqis Actually Wanted

Iraqi populations watched these developments with mounting anger. British military occupation had not brought the liberation proclaimed in 1917. Instead, it brought military governors issuing decrees, British political officers making decisions affecting Iraqi lives, and no timeline for British withdrawal. Arab nationalists, Shia religious leaders, tribal sheikhs, and urban intellectuals began coordinating resistance. Their demands were straightforward: immediate independence, an Arab government representing Iraqi populations, and British withdrawal. These demands were incompatible with British plans for indefinite control under the mandate system.

The revolt began in the Shia-dominated mid-Euphrates region in May 1920 and spread rapidly across central and southern Iraq. Tribal forces attacked British garrisons, ambushed military columns, and seized control of towns. British estimates suggest that over 130,000 Iraqis actively participated in armed resistance, with many more providing support. The rebels were united only in opposing British occupation—the coalition included Sunni Arab nationalists demanding Arab government, Shia religious leaders calling for Islamic government, tribal sheikhs seeking autonomy, and peasants wanting land reform. These differences would matter later, but in summer 1920, anger at British occupation temporarily united disparate groups.

The British response demonstrated what mandate rule would mean. British and Indian Army forces deployed from India reinforced garrisons. The Royal Air Force bombed rebel-held villages and tribal encampments. Villages suspected of harboring rebels were burned. Collective fines bankrupted entire communities. British political officers authorized summary executions. Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Leachman, a British political officer with extensive experience in Iraq, was assassinated by a tribal sheikh in August 1920—the first high-profile British casualty. The British killed the sheikh's entire family in retaliation.

Air power played a crucial role in suppressing the revolt. RAF bombers struck villages without warning. They targeted crops, livestock, and civilian infrastructure to terrorize populations into submission. Air Marshal John Salmond, RAF commander in Iraq, reported with satisfaction that bombing "had a great moral effect" on tribal populations. This was deliberate strategy—using indiscriminate violence against civilians to break resistance. Arthur Harris, who would later command RAF Bomber Command during World War II's strategic bombing campaign against Germany, served in Iraq during the 1920 revolt and learned lessons about using air power against civilian populations. In his later writings, Harris described Iraq as the testing ground for theories of "air control" that he would apply with devastating effect against German cities.

The revolt ended in October 1920 after British forces had killed approximately ten thousand Iraqis. British casualties totaled about five hundred—an exchange ratio revealing the asymmetry of power. The financial cost to Britain reached £40 million—a huge sum that shocked British politicians and accelerated plans for cheaper indirect rule. The political cost was Britain's reputation as liberator—whatever credibility British promises of liberation had possessed vanished in the face of mass killing. British officials drew different lessons: that Iraqis were ungrateful primitives requiring firm control, and that indirect rule through an Iraqi government would be more cost-effective than direct military administration.

Drawing the Borders

The boundaries of the new Iraqi state emerged from British strategic interests and negotiations with France and Turkey, not from any consideration of Iraqi preferences or geographic and ethnic logic. The southern and central regions posed little controversy—these areas were firmly under British control, had no rival claimants, and served British strategic objectives of securing the Gulf and oil fields. The northern boundary with Turkey and the western boundary with French-controlled Syria proved more complex.

Mosul province presented the most difficult challenge. The province contained significant oil reserves—geological surveys suggested this was potentially the richest oil region in the Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Agreement had placed Mosul in France's sphere of influence. But British officials, increasingly aware of oil's strategic importance, wanted Mosul in British-controlled Iraq. The British negotiated with France, eventually reaching an agreement: Britain would get Mosul if Britain supported French claims to Syria and provided France a share of Mesopotamian oil revenues. France agreed, abandoning Kurdish populations in Mosul province to British control.

The Turkish government, emerging from the Ottoman Empire's collapse under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, also claimed Mosul. The Treaty of Sèvres had granted Mosul to Britain, but Turkey rejected the Sèvres treaty as a humiliating diktat imposed by victorious powers. Turkish forces fought Greek armies in Anatolia, expelled them, and established facts on the ground suggesting Turkey might militarily contest British control of Mosul. British officials worried that war with Turkey would be expensive and unpopular. The issue went to the League of Nations, which established a commission to investigate. The commission visited Mosul in 1924 and concluded that the population's preferences were divided—Kurds wanted neither Arab nor Turkish rule but their own state, Arabs living in Mosul preferred joining Iraq to joining Turkey, and Turkmen minorities leaned toward Turkey. The League ultimately awarded Mosul to Iraq in December 1925, on the condition that Britain maintain the mandate for twenty-five years to protect Kurdish interests. This condition was never fulfilled—Britain handed Iraq independence in 1932, and Kurdish demands for autonomy were suppressed by successive Iraqi governments.

The western boundary with French-controlled Syria drew a line through desert, separating tribes and towns that had traded and intermarried for centuries. The boundary served British and French administrative convenience, not Iraqi needs. Tribes that had moved freely across the region now faced an international border. Trade routes that had connected Aleppo to Mosul now crossed two mandate zones with different currencies, regulations, and political systems. The boundary created artificial separations that complicated economic and social relations.

The Kurdish question remained unresolved. Kurds in Mosul province had repeatedly sought independence or at minimum autonomy within whatever state controlled their territory. The Treaty of Sèvres had promised Kurds an independent state, but this promise was abandoned when British and Turkish interests required it. Approximately one to 1.2 million Kurds were incorporated into Iraq against their clear preference for independence. They would resist Arab government for the next century, fighting wars, facing chemical weapons attacks, suffering mass deportations, and never abandoning demands for self-determination.

The final borders of Iraq encompassed 438,000 square kilometers, three former Ottoman provinces, and approximately 3 million people (the population had recovered somewhat from wartime losses by the early 1920s). These borders included populations with limited unity, created a state with no historical precedent, and trapped minorities in a polity dominated by groups with whom they had antagonistic relationships. The borders served British interests perfectly—they created a manageable colonial unit under British control with access to oil reserves and strategic position protecting routes to India. Whether they served Iraqi interests was never a British concern.

Who Were the British Empire-Builders?

Understanding how the British created Iraq requires understanding the individuals who made key decisions. These men—they were all men—came from British elite backgrounds, educated at Oxford or Cambridge, trained in British military or colonial service, and convinced of British

civilization's superiority. They made decisions affecting millions of lives with casual confidence that they knew best.

Winston Churchill, as Colonial Secretary from 1921 to 1922, had ultimate responsibility for Iraq policy. Churchill was a complicated figure—a gifted writer and politician who could be rhetorically magnificent, but also a committed imperialist who believed British rule benefited colonized populations whether they wanted it or not. His writings about Iraq revealed paternalistic racism tempered by some awareness of contradictions. Churchill understood that Iraqis resented British occupation, but believed this resentment was shortsighted—Iraqis would eventually appreciate British rule once they experienced its benefits. He also believed that British strategic interests outweighed Iraqi preferences. His advocacy of using poison gas against "uncivilised tribes" demonstrated his willingness to employ extreme violence when imperial interests required it.

Sir Percy Cox served as High Commissioner for Iraq from 1920 to 1923, making him the most powerful British official in Iraq during the critical state formation period. Cox was a career British Indian Political Service officer who had spent decades in the Persian Gulf region. He spoke Arabic and Persian, understood Middle Eastern politics, and believed firmly in British imperial mission. Cox viewed himself as a benevolent father figure guiding Iraqis toward civilization. His policies reflected this paternalism—he genuinely wanted Iraq to develop and prosper, but always within a framework of British control and British-defined interests. Cox selected which Iraqis to empower, decided constitutional structures, settled tribal disputes, and shaped virtually every aspect of the new Iraqi state. His legacy was a state designed to serve British interests while maintaining the appearance of Iraqi self-government.

Gertrude Bell served as Oriental Secretary to Cox, making her the most influential woman in British Middle East policy. Bell was extraordinary—a Oxford-educated scholar, accomplished archaeologist, explorer who had traveled extensively in the Middle East before World War I, and fluent Arabic speaker. She knew Iraq and Iraqis better than any other British official. Bell's writings demonstrate deep respect for Arab culture and genuine desire to see Iraq prosper. But she was also a committed imperialist who believed British guidance was necessary for Iraqi progress. Bell supported installing Faisal as king, helped design constitutional structures, and worked to build an Iraqi administration staffed by cooperative elites. She died in 1926 in Baghdad, increasingly disillusioned as she recognized that the Iraq she had helped create was failing to meet even modest hopes for stability and development.

T.E. Lawrence—"Lawrence of Arabia"—played a lesser role in Iraq itself but was influential at the Cairo Conference and in shaping British Arabia policy. Lawrence had led Arab forces during the revolt against the Ottomans, developed close relationships with Faisal and other Arab leaders, and emerged from the war convinced that Britain owed Arabs genuine independence. But Lawrence's idealism faced British strategic realities. At the Cairo Conference, Lawrence supported installing Faisal in Iraq as partial compensation for Britain's betrayal of Arab independence promises in Syria. Lawrence became increasingly disillusioned with British policy, recognizing that mandate rule was imperialism under different branding. His later writings expressed guilt about British betrayal of Arab allies.

These individuals and dozens of other British officials, military commanders, and colonial administrators made thousands of decisions that shaped Iraq. They chose which Iraqis to empower and which to marginalize. They drew boundaries. They wrote constitutions. They allocated oil concessions. They decided when to negotiate and when to bomb. Most acted with genuine belief that they were doing good—bringing order, development, and eventual self-government to populations they viewed as backward. The road to Iraq's dysfunctional state formation was paved with British good intentions combined with British strategic self-interest and British racial arrogance.

What This Meant for Average Iraqis

For the peasant family that had survived Ottoman rule, World War I, famine, and military occupation, the creation of Iraq meant very little changed in daily life. They still worked land they did not own. They still paid rent to landlords. They still surrendered large portions of their harvest to people with power over them. The landlord might now have a title deed registered by British political officers instead of an Ottoman land grant, but the rent was the same. The tax collector might now work for an Iraqi government instead of Ottoman administration, but the taxes were the same. The system of extraction persisted even as formal sovereignty changed.

What did change was hope for improvement. Iraqi nationalists had promised that independence would bring land reform, education, modern development. The British promised that the mandate system would prepare Iraq for self-government. These promises created expectations that would be bitterly disappointed. As it became clear through the 1920s that land reform would not happen, that education expansion would remain minimal, that oil wealth would flow to British companies rather than Iraqi development, Iraqi populations grew increasingly cynical about both their own nationalist leaders and British promises.

The violence of 1920 also taught harsh lessons. Resisting British authority meant death—ten thousand had died demanding immediate independence. The British possessed overwhelming military power and would use it without hesitation. Air power meant the British could strike anywhere without warning. Village elders who had considered resistance decided accommodation was safer. This was exactly what British air control policy intended—creating terror so overwhelming that populations chose submission over resistance.

The borders mattered little to rural populations in the early 1920s. Peasants working fields along the Tigris had no reason to care whether they lived in the Mosul, Baghdad, or Basra province, or whether those provinces were now combined into "Iraq." Borders became relevant when they disrupted trade, separated families, or made migrations across what had been fluid territory now illegal border crossings. For Kurdish populations, being trapped in an Arab-dominated state meant their national aspirations were crushed. For tribes whose territories crossed the new boundaries, borders meant harassment by border guards and interference with traditional migration patterns.

What mattered most was power—who had it, who could wield it, how it affected one's family. The British had power. The Sunni Arab urban elite that British officials were empowering had

power. Everyone else had to navigate these power structures, attach themselves to powerful patrons, and hope for minimal exploitation. This was not so different from Ottoman times, except the British were more efficient administrators and more ruthless when employing violence. The mandate system promised preparation for self-government. The reality was a new form of imperial rule designed to serve British interests indefinitely.

END OF PART 1

Part 2 will examine mandate engineering in detail: the constitutional frameworks, economic structures, elite selection, and institutional designs that shaped the Iraqi state between 1921 and 1932.

IRAQ CASE STUDY PART 2 OF 4

Mandate Engineering: Building Instability Into the State (1921-1932)

III. Constitutional and Legal Frameworks: Sovereignty as Façade

The British faced a fundamental problem in Iraq: how to maintain real control while granting nominal independence sufficient to satisfy both Iraqi nationalist demands and international opinion represented by the League of Nations. The solution was constitutional engineering that created the appearance of Iraqi self-government while embedding mechanisms ensuring British veto power over any decision affecting British interests. This was not accidental design flaw but deliberate policy. British officials understood exactly what they were creating—a dependent state that could never exercise genuine sovereignty so long as British strategic interests required Iraqi subordination.

The process began with installing Faisal as king in August 1921. Faisal arrived in Iraq as a complete outsider. He was born in Mecca, raised in Constantinople, had fought with British forces during the Arab Revolt, and briefly ruled Syria before French forces expelled him in July 1920. He had never lived in Iraq, had no tribal connections to Iraqi society, spoke a Hejazi Arabic dialect that sounded foreign to Iraqis, and possessed no independent base of support. The British selected him precisely because of these weaknesses—he would depend entirely on British backing for survival. Sir Percy Cox organized a carefully managed referendum in which Faisal received ninety-six percent approval. This referendum was theatrical performance, not democratic choice. British political officers ensured tribal sheikhs and urban notables understood that supporting Faisal meant continued British favor and subsidies, while opposing him meant losing British protection and facing potential reprisals. The result was predetermined.

Faisal understood his position's fragility. In private conversations with British advisors, he acknowledged that without British military presence, Iraqi factions would overthrow him within months. His survival strategy consisted of carefully balancing Iraqi nationalist demands for independence against British demands for continued control, never pushing British officials so far that they abandoned him but always pressing for incremental Iraqi gains. This balancing act defined the entire mandate period—Iraqi leaders demanding more autonomy while British officials granted minimal concessions designed to preserve real British control.

The constitutional structure emerged through negotiations between Iraqi leaders, British advisors, and British officials in London between 1921 and 1925. The British insisted that any constitution must be paired with a treaty between Iraq and Britain establishing their relationship.

This became the fundamental mechanism for limiting Iraqi sovereignty—regardless of what the constitution said about Iraqi independence, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty would define Britain's reserved powers. The 1922 treaty, which Cox pressured Faisal to sign by threatening to withdraw British support, granted Britain control over Iraqi foreign policy, required Iraq to accept British advisors in all government ministries, gave Britain military basing rights, and mandated British approval for all legislation affecting British interests. The treaty's duration was set at twenty years, though Britain could terminate it earlier if Iraq satisfied British requirements for stability and institutional capacity.

Iraqi nationalists exploded in fury when the treaty's terms became public. The treaty made a mockery of independence—Iraq would have a flag, a king, a parliament, but no actual sovereignty. Street protests erupted in Baghdad. Tribal leaders threatened renewed revolt. Shia clerics issued fatwas declaring cooperation with British occupation religiously forbidden. The British response combined concessions and coercion. Cox offered to reduce the treaty duration to four years, though with provisions allowing extension if conditions weren't met. British forces suppressed the most vocal opposition. Leading nationalists were arrested or forced into exile. Shia clerics who issued the most provocative fatwas were deported to Iran. The message was clear: Iraqi leaders could negotiate terms within British-defined limits, but challenging the fundamental British right to control Iraq's foreign policy and strategic decisions would not be tolerated.

The constitution finally promulgated in 1925 established Iraq as a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament. The Chamber of Deputies would be elected through limited suffrage—only men meeting property and tax payment requirements could vote, excluding perhaps eighty percent of the population. The Senate would be appointed by the king, ensuring that the upper house remained conservative and pro-British. The king retained substantial powers: appointing the prime minister, dissolving parliament, vetoing legislation, and commanding the armed forces. Ministers were responsible to parliament but the king could dismiss them. This structure created multiple veto points where British influence could operate. If parliament passed legislation threatening British interests, the Senate could block it. If the Senate failed, the king could veto. If the king proved insufficiently cooperative, British advisors could apply pressure. British officials also retained direct control over Iraq's military forces during the mandate period, ensuring no Iraqi government could use force against British interests.

The judicial system preserved British advantages while creating Iraqi institutions. Ottoman law was abolished and replaced with legal codes based on British imperial models adapted for Iraqi conditions. British legal advisors drafted these codes, ensuring they protected British commercial interests and property rights. Separate judicial systems operated for different communities—personal status law remained under religious authority for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, while commercial law followed secular codes. This multiplicity of legal systems created complexity that privileged those with resources to navigate it—British companies, wealthy merchants, large landowners—while disadvantaging average people who couldn't afford lawyers or understand bureaucratic procedures.

The mandate system's legal status remained contested throughout the 1920s. The League of Nations technically supervised Britain's administration, requiring annual reports and theoretically able to terminate the mandate if Britain failed to fulfill its obligations to prepare Iraq for independence. In practice, the League was toothless. Britain submitted reports describing steady progress toward Iraqi self-government while simultaneously maintaining control over all decisions of importance. When Iraqi nationalists petitioned the League demanding immediate independence, British officials assured League representatives that Iraqis were not yet ready for self-government, that tribal divisions made stability precarious, that sectarian conflicts required British mediation, and that oil infrastructure needed protection from tribal raids. The League accepted British assurances, having neither the will nor the capacity to challenge British policy.

What this constitutional structure meant was that Iraq achieved the forms of independence—parliament, constitution, ministries—without the substance of sovereignty. Every Iraqi decision of consequence required British approval. Iraqi politicians quickly learned to operate within these constraints. The clever ones discovered they could use British power to advance their own interests by positioning themselves as indispensable British allies. The foolish ones challenged British authority directly and found themselves removed from power, exiled, or worse. The system bred a particular kind of political culture: one in which rhetoric about independence flourished while actual policy served British interests, one in which leaders told their populations they were fighting for sovereignty while privately making deals with British advisors, one in which the gap between public performance and private reality grew so wide that cynicism became the only rational response.

For the average person, constitutional structures remained distant abstractions. The peasant working rented land cared little whether Iraq had a parliament or whether the king could veto legislation. What mattered was whether the system delivered land reform, reduced taxation, expanded education, or improved public services. On all these measures, the mandate period failed. Constitutional engineering created political institutions designed to manage elite competition and ensure British control, not to deliver benefits to populations. The constitution's explicit limitations on suffrage—requiring property ownership and tax payments—ensured that the rural poor, who constituted the majority, had no political voice. They could not vote, could not organize politically without facing suppression, and had no mechanism to demand accountability from elites who extracted wealth from their labor.

The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty System: Permanent Dependence

The series of Anglo-Iraqi treaties signed between 1922 and 1930 constituted the real constitutional structure governing Iraq. These treaties, not the 1925 constitution, determined Iraq's actual status. Each treaty renegotiation involved Iraqi demands for greater sovereignty met by British concessions that preserved essential British interests. The British strategy was giving ground on symbols while retaining control over substances—allowing Iraq to call itself independent while ensuring Britain controlled foreign policy, oil access, and military basing.

The 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, signed as the price for British support for Iraqi admission to the League of Nations and nominal independence in 1932, demonstrated this pattern perfectly. The

treaty granted Iraq formal independence but required Iraq to "consult" Britain on all foreign policy matters, grant Britain military basing rights in perpetuity, allow Britain to move troops across Iraqi territory during wartime, protect British commercial interests, and maintain British advisors in key ministries. The treaty also contained classified annexes detailing oil arrangements and military cooperation. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, who negotiated the treaty, understood he was accepting continued British dominance. He calculated that nominal independence with British protection was preferable to continued mandate status that embarrassed Iraqi leaders internationally. Iraqi nationalists denounced the treaty as a sellout. Nuri survived their criticism because British backing gave him power regardless of domestic popularity.

British officials were remarkably frank in private about the treaty system's purpose. High Commissioner Francis Humphrys wrote to London in 1930 explaining that the new treaty "preserves for us in perpetuity both the substance and the appearance of control, though we have yielded the former reality of the mandate." This was the formula: yield the appearance of control (the mandate's formal authority) while preserving its substance (actual power over decisions). Another official memorandum from 1929 stated bluntly: "We need to maintain essential British interests while allowing Iraqis to believe they have achieved independence. The treaty system accomplishes this by creating legal obligations that any Iraqi government must accept regardless of nationalist rhetoric." This was constitutional engineering as imperial strategy—creating legal frameworks that trapped successor states in permanent dependence while allowing Britain to claim it had fulfilled obligations to prepare colonies for self-government.

The treaty system also established patterns that would persist after British influence declined. Iraqi leaders learned that sovereignty was negotiable, that external powers could be played against each other to maximize Iraqi gains, that what mattered was not constitutional rights but practical power. When American influence replaced British influence after 1945, Iraqi leaders employed similar strategies—accepting American military and economic aid in exchange for policies serving American interests, maintaining nationalist rhetoric domestically while cooperating with Americans privately, positioning Iraq to extract maximum rents from Cold War competition. The mandate period's constitutional structures taught Iraqi elites how to operate in a system where real sovereignty did not exist, where foreign powers made key decisions, and where elite survival required accommodation with external hegemons regardless of domestic preferences.

IV. Economic Structures: Extraction as Development

British officials justified the mandate system by claiming Britain would develop Iraq's economy, building infrastructure, modernizing agriculture, and preparing Iraq for eventual prosperity. Investment statistics tell a different story. During the mandate period, British government and private investment in Iraq totaled approximately £30 million. Oil company investments added perhaps another £10-15 million. Total investment across twenty-three years amounted to

roughly £40-45 million for a population of three to four million people—approximately £10-12 per capita over the entire period. This compared unfavorably to British investment in colonies where British populations had settled, where per capita investment reached several times higher levels.

Where did this limited investment go? British priorities shaped allocation. Railways connected the northern oil fields to Baghdad and Baghdad to the Persian Gulf, facilitating oil export. Port facilities at Basra handled British commerce. Administrative buildings housed British advisors and Iraqi officials. Military bases protected British strategic interests. These investments served British needs. Investment in agriculture, education, healthcare, or industrial development beyond oil extraction remained minimal. The British built Iraq's infrastructure to extract resources and maintain control, not to develop a balanced economy serving Iraqi welfare.

Land Tenure and the Creation of a Landlord Class

The most consequential British economic policy was transforming Iraq's land tenure system to create a class of large landowners who would depend on British backing and support British rule. This policy had devastating long-term consequences, creating inequality that persists in 2025. The British inherited an Ottoman system where most agricultural land was technically state-owned (miri land) but cultivated by peasants and tribes with customary use rights. The British transformed this into a system of private property ownership where tribal sheikhs and urban elites acquired title to vast estates, converting customary users into tenant farmers and sharecroppers.

The mechanism was the 1932 Land Settlement Law, though British policies encouraging land registration and privatization began earlier. British officials pressured tribal sheikhs to register tribal lands in their personal names rather than as collective tribal property. The justification was that individual ownership would increase agricultural productivity by giving owners incentive to invest. The reality was that registration converted sheikhs from tribal leaders holding land in trust for tribal members into landlords owning land absolutely. Tribesmen who had cultivated land for generations lost customary rights, becoming tenants paying rent to sheikhs who now legally owned what had been collective property.

The transformation was systematic. British political officers working with tribes encouraged sheikhs to register lands, offering benefits including tax advantages, government subsidies, and political support. Sheikhs who registered lands early accumulated enormous estates. The most successful, like Sheikh Majid al-Khalisi in the Diyala region or Sheikh Muhammad al-Habib in the mid-Euphrates, controlled hundreds of thousands of acres. These men became the rural power base supporting the Iraqi government and British influence. They understood that their fortunes derived from British-backed land privatization and they loyally supported British interests.

Urban merchants and officials also acquired land through registration. Wealthy Baghdad families purchased registration rights to agricultural lands they had never seen, hiring managers to extract rents from peasant cultivators. Government officials used their positions to acquire

choice properties. Money lenders foreclosed on indebted peasants and registered seized lands in their names. By the 1930s, perhaps two to three percent of landowners controlled sixty to seventy percent of agricultural land. The remaining cultivators—the vast majority—owned small subsistence plots, rented land from large owners, or worked as agricultural laborers with no land rights whatsoever.

The terms of tenancy were brutal. Typical sharecropping arrangements gave the landowner fifty to seventy percent of the harvest, with the cultivator providing all labor, seed, tools, and draft animals. The cultivator kept what remained after paying the landowner's share, settling debts to moneylenders, paying various fees, and feeding his family. This left most sharecropping families barely at subsistence. Bad harvests meant debt. Accumulated debt meant losing even sharecropping rights and descending to agricultural labor status. The system ensured that wealth flowed upward from those who worked the land to those who owned it.

British officials understood exactly what they were creating. A 1932 administrative report acknowledged: "The land settlement policy has resulted in concentration of ownership in fewer hands and the creation of a class of landless agricultural laborers. This was not the intended outcome but appears inevitable given the economic power disparities between tribal sheikhs and ordinary tribesmen." This was bureaucratic language obscuring deliberate policy. British officials wanted a landlord class that would support their rule. They got it. The report continued: "The large landowners constitute a conservative political force resistant to radical change and supportive of established order. This is advantageous for stability." Stability meant maintaining British interests. The political advantage of creating a conservative landlord class outweighed any concerns about peasant welfare.

The absence of land reform during the mandate period was not oversight but policy. Iraqi nationalist leaders repeatedly demanded land redistribution to break landlord power and create a class of independent peasant farmers. British officials blocked these demands, arguing that any disruption of land ownership would reduce agricultural production and threaten food security. The real calculation was political: land reform would destroy the conservative landlord class that supported British influence and might empower peasant populations whose loyalty to the Iraqi state was uncertain. Better to maintain inequality than risk instability that could threaten British interests.

Peasant families experienced this transformation as catastrophe. The tribal member who had cultivated land his family had worked for generations suddenly found himself a tenant paying rent to a sheikh who now held legal title. If he protested, he faced eviction—the sheikh could call on government authority to enforce property rights. If he fell into debt, he lost access to land entirely. Migration to cities became common as rural conditions deteriorated. Baghdad's population swelled with displaced peasants seeking any work available. These migrants formed an urban underclass living in slums, creating social tensions that would explode decades later.

Oil: The Curse That Would Define Iraq

No aspect of mandate engineering proved more consequential than oil concession arrangements. Mesopotamian oil reserves were known to exist before World War I but their full extent remained unclear in the 1920s. British officials understood that oil's importance was growing—the Royal Navy's conversion to oil fuel, the automobile's spread, and industrial applications made oil a strategic resource. Securing Iraq's oil meant ensuring British companies controlled extraction and that any Iraqi government protected British oil interests regardless of nationalist sentiment.

The Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), originally a multinational consortium including British, Dutch, German, and Ottoman interests, had obtained Ottoman concessions to Mesopotamian oil before World War I. After Ottoman defeat, the British government seized German shares and reorganized the company with British majority control. The United States government, representing American oil company interests, demanded inclusion in post-war oil arrangements. The result was a compromise: TPC was reorganized in 1928 as the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) with British, Dutch, French, and American shareholding—British Petroleum and Shell held forty-seven and a half percent combined, American companies held twenty-three and three quarters percent, French companies held twenty-three and three quarters percent, and Calouste Gulbenkian held five percent as the original deal-maker.

The concession terms granted IPC exclusive rights to prospect for and extract oil in most of Iraq's territory for seventy-five years. IPC would pay the Iraqi government a royalty of four shillings gold per ton of oil extracted—a paltry sum representing perhaps ten to fifteen percent of the oil's value. IPC maintained complete control over extraction rates, investment decisions, and export arrangements. The Iraqi government could not force IPC to develop fields faster, could not require IPC to build refineries in Iraq rather than exporting crude for processing elsewhere, and could not access IPC's books to verify production figures. This arrangement gave foreign companies the bulk of Iraq's oil wealth while providing the Iraqi government minimal revenue.

The first major oil strike came at Baba Gurgur near Kirkuk in October 1927. The well erupted in a gusher that took ten days to cap, wasting perhaps ninety-five thousand tons of oil. The discovery confirmed Iraq's enormous potential—the Kirkuk field was one of the world's largest. Commercial production began in 1934, after the mandate formally ended but under concession terms established during the mandate period. Oil revenue began flowing to the Iraqi government, but at rates ensuring foreign companies captured the vast majority of value. In the late 1930s, Iraq received approximately £1 million annually in oil royalties while IPC earned perhaps £5-8 million in profits. The disparity was stark and would grow worse as production expanded.

British officials justified these arrangements as necessary to attract investment in oil development. They argued that oil company expertise was essential, that the risks of oil exploration required allowing companies substantial profits, and that Iraq benefited from any revenue rather than receiving nothing if companies weren't willing to invest. These justifications ignored power realities. Iraq had no choice but to accept terms Britain dictated. The Iraqi government could not develop oil fields itself—it lacked capital, expertise, and international

market access. Even threatening nationalization was pointless when Iraq depended on British military protection. British officials understood they were rigging the game in favor of British companies. A 1929 Colonial Office memorandum stated frankly: "The oil concession arrangements ensure British companies dominate Iraqi oil production for the foreseeable future. This serves British strategic interests in securing oil supplies and maintaining influence over any Iraqi government through control of its primary revenue source."

The long-term consequences proved catastrophic. Oil wealth, rather than funding Iraqi development, became a prize that elites fought to control. Whoever controlled the government controlled oil revenue. This made political power worth fighting for—coup leaders knew that seizing power meant accessing oil wealth. The oil curse—the pattern where resource-rich countries experience worse governance and more violence than resource-poor countries—would define Iraqi politics for the next ninety years. Had the British invested oil revenue in Iraqi development during the mandate period, building infrastructure, expanding education, and creating employment, they might have established better patterns. Instead, they ensured oil wealth went to foreign companies and that what revenue reached the Iraqi government enriched elites rather than funding broad-based development.

Infrastructure and the Illusion of Development

British infrastructure investment in Iraq created the appearance of modernization while serving primarily British commercial and strategic interests. The railway system demonstrated this pattern. The British built railways connecting Basra to Baghdad and extending northward to the Kirkuk oil fields. This network facilitated oil export and movement of British military forces. It did little for Iraqi economic development beyond oil. Railways did not connect agricultural regions to markets in ways that would benefit peasant farmers. They did not link cities to each other in patterns serving Iraqi internal trade. They connected resources to ports, allowing extraction and export.

Port development at Basra similarly served British commerce. The British invested in deepening channels, building docks, and expanding warehousing to handle date exports, oil shipments, and British imports. These facilities served British shipping companies and British trade. They did not serve Iraqi industrial development because Iraq had no industry beyond oil extraction. The Basra port became a colonial entrepot—Iraqi resources flowed out, British manufactured goods flowed in, and Iraq remained economically dependent.

The British built few roads. Land transport relied on primitive tracks impassable during rainy seasons. Irrigation infrastructure received minimal investment despite irrigation's critical importance for agricultural productivity. The British did survey irrigation potential and produced plans for dam construction and canal renovation, but implementation remained limited. The major exception was the Hindiya Barrage, completed in 1927, which regulated water flow on the Euphrates. This project improved irrigation for perhaps one hundred thousand acres and demonstrated what systematic investment could achieve. That it remained exceptional rather than typical revealed British priorities—investments that served British strategic interests happened, investments that would primarily benefit Iraqi agriculture remained unrealized plans.

Electricity generation and distribution barely existed. Baghdad got limited electricity service in the 1920s, supplied by a small generating plant. Other cities had no electric power. Rural areas remained entirely without electricity. Telephone and telegraph systems connected British administrative centers but did not extend to rural areas. Running water and sewage systems existed only in limited urban areas. Public health infrastructure remained minimal—a few hospitals in major cities, virtually no rural health services, no systematic public health campaigns. Mortality rates remained high. Infant mortality probably exceeded three hundred deaths per thousand live births. Life expectancy remained below forty years.

The contrast between British investment in Iraq and British investment in Palestine during the same period revealed priorities. Britain invested far more per capita in Palestine because Zionist colonization required infrastructure to support Jewish immigration. Railways, ports, roads, electrical systems, water systems—all received investment that dwarfed Iraqi infrastructure spending. This was not because Britain valued Palestinian Arabs more than Iraqis, but because Zionist colonization served British strategic interests in ways that Iraqi development did not. Iraq needed just enough infrastructure to extract oil and maintain British control, nothing more.

For average Iraqis, British infrastructure investment meant minimal improvement in living conditions. The peasant family working rented land saw no benefit from railways unless they happened to live along the route. They could not afford manufactured goods arriving through Basra port. They had no access to electricity, running water, healthcare, or other modern amenities. Their children still attended no school. Their housing remained mud brick or reed structures. Their diet remained subsistence-level grain, dates, and tea. The gap between British rhetoric about developing Iraq and the reality of continued poverty was enormous. British officials pointed to statistics showing railway kilometers built, port tonnage handled, and telegraph lines strung. These numbers measured British interests served, not Iraqi welfare improved.

Taxation: Who Paid for the State?

The Iraqi government's revenue came primarily from taxing the poor. Agricultural taxes, based on assessed land productivity, fell on cultivators who actually worked the land even when they didn't own it. Landowners manipulated assessments through political connections, ensuring their lands were undervalued while peasant plots were overvalued. Customs duties on imports fell disproportionately on common people purchasing necessities—tea, sugar, cloth. The wealthy could afford customs duties on luxury imports. The poor struggled to pay duties on necessities. Urban taxes on property and businesses were carefully structured to avoid excessive burden on merchant classes that supported the government.

Oil revenue that might have reduced the tax burden on poor populations instead went to government operations and elite consumption. The Iraqi government employed thousands of officials whose salaries consumed much of the budget. Military spending took perhaps twenty to thirty percent of total expenditure. Public services for common people—education, healthcare, agricultural extension, rural development—received minimal funding. The budget reflected elite

priorities: maintaining internal security, paying officials, supporting the king's household, and ensuring the government could control populations without providing them significant benefits.

Iraqi nationalists recognized this pattern and denounced it repeatedly. They pointed out that tax burden fell on those least able to pay while elites who benefited from the state paid minimal taxes. They demanded progressive taxation, oil revenue dedicated to development, and budget priorities shifted toward education and healthcare. British advisors blocked these demands, arguing that any tax reform might threaten revenue collection and destabilize government finances. The real concern was that progressive taxation might reduce elite support for a government system that served elite interests. Better to maintain regressive taxation and elite cooperation than risk alienating landowners and merchants by requiring them to pay their fair share.

V. Elite Selection and Engineering: Creating a Ruling Class

British mandate policy deliberately empowered specific Iraqi groups while marginalizing others. This was not accidental—British officials consciously chose which Iraqis to elevate to positions of power, understanding that these choices would shape Iraq for decades. The fundamental decision was empowering Sunni Arab urban elite to dominate administration, military, and politics despite their minority status. This choice reflected British calculations about who would be reliable clients and British prejudices about which Iraqis were capable of governance.

The Sunni Arab Elite: Background and British Selection

The Sunni Arab urban elite constituted perhaps ten to fifteen percent of Iraq's population but dominated Ottoman administration of the Mesopotamian provinces for centuries. This group included families in Baghdad, Mosul, and other cities whose men had served as Ottoman officials, military officers, religious judges, and merchants. They were educated in Ottoman schools, often spoke Turkish as well as Arabic, and identified with Ottoman state traditions. Many had served in the Ottoman army during World War I, fighting against the British before the empire's collapse forced them to seek accommodation with the new masters.

British officials viewed this group as natural governing class. They possessed administrative experience, literacy, and organizational capacity that Iraq's majority peasant population lacked. They spoke Arabic, giving them legitimacy with Arab populations that British officials could never possess. Most importantly, as a demographic minority, they would require British backing to govern over the Shia Arab majority and Kurdish minority. This dependence was crucial—it meant Sunni Arab elite could never afford to challenge British interests too directly without risking British withdrawal of support and subsequent overthrow by hostile majorities.

The British systematically recruited Sunni Arabs into the new Iraqi administration. Government ministries were staffed predominantly by Sunni Arabs. The upper ranks of the bureaucracy became virtually a Sunni Arab preserve. British political officers worked with key families—the al-Said, al-Gaylani, al-Hashimi, al-Suwaidi, and others—who provided personnel for cabinet positions and senior administrative posts. These families intermarried, creating kinship networks that dominated politics. They developed patron-client relationships with British officials, understanding that their power derived from British backing and they needed to serve British interests to maintain their positions.

This elite's relationship with British rule was complex. Many were genuinely nationalist, believing in Arab independence and resenting British imperialism. Some had participated in Arab nationalist movements before and during World War I. But they also understood pragmatic realities. British military power was overwhelming. No conceivable Iraqi force could expel the British. The choice was between cooperation that preserved some dignity and influence, or futile resistance that would be crushed. They chose cooperation, telling themselves and their populations that working within the system would eventually lead to genuine independence, that each negotiation extracted incremental gains from British control, and that their role was positioning Iraq for eventual full sovereignty.

The most important member of this class was Nuri al-Said, who would serve as prime minister fourteen times between 1930 and 1958. Nuri was an Ottoman military officer who joined the Arab Revolt, fought with Faisal in Syria, and came to Iraq with Faisal in 1921. He was brilliant, ruthless, and completely committed to maintaining British alliance. Nuri understood that Iraq's weakness required external backing and believed British protection was the least-bad option. He cooperated fully with British advisors, implemented British policy, and suppressed nationalist opposition demanding more radical independence. British officials loved him—he was efficient, reliable, and untroubled by nationalist scruples that might threaten British interests. Iraqi nationalists hated him, viewing him as a British puppet. Nuri's calculation was that cooperation with Britain was the only path to Iraqi stability. He was wrong—his policies created resentment that would explode in the 1958 revolution that killed him.

The Marginalization of Shia Arabs

Shia Arabs constituted fifty to fifty-five percent of Iraq's population but remained largely excluded from power during the mandate period. This exclusion was deliberate British policy driven by multiple prejudices and strategic calculations. British officials viewed Shia Arabs with suspicion because of their religious connections to Persia, where Shia Islam dominated. They worried that Iraqi Shia might look to Persia for religious authority and political leadership rather than to the British-backed Iraqi government. They also believed that Shia religious leadership's opposition to British rule during the 1920 revolt demonstrated Shia unreliability.

More fundamentally, British officials believed Shia Arabs lacked the education and administrative capacity of Sunni Arabs. Shia populations were predominantly rural, agricultural, and poor. Literacy rates among Shia Arabs were far lower than among Sunni Arabs. Few Shia had served in Ottoman administration, which had discriminated against Shia communities.

British officials concluded that Shia Arabs were not suitable governing class material—they lacked experience, education, and the secular orientation that British officials valued in administrators.

The result was systematic Shia exclusion. Government employment discriminated against Shia applicants. The military officer corps was overwhelmingly Sunni Arab. Cabinet positions rarely went to Shia politicians. When Shia leaders demanded proportional representation based on their demographic majority, British officials refused, arguing that governance required merit not demographic quotas, and that Shia simply didn't possess qualifications in sufficient numbers. This was self-fulfilling reasoning—Ottoman discrimination had prevented Shia from acquiring qualifications, British discrimination continued the pattern, and the absence of qualified Shia candidates was then used to justify continued discrimination.

Shia religious leaders—the mujtahids based in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala—represented the most organized Shia political force. These clerics commanded enormous social authority among Shia populations. During the 1920 revolt, they had issued fatwas declaring cooperation with British occupation religiously forbidden. The British responded with repression and cooptation. Leading mujtahids who continued opposing British rule faced deportation to Persia. Others were offered government subsidies and recognition in exchange for political quietism. Some accepted, fragmenting Shia religious leadership. By the late 1920s, Shia clerical opposition to British rule had weakened, but Shia populations remained alienated from a government they viewed as illegitimate because it was dominated by a Sunni Arab minority backed by foreign occupiers.

This pattern had catastrophic long-term consequences. Shia populations learned that the Iraqi state was not their state, that it served Sunni Arab interests and British interests but not Shia interests. Shia political movements that emerged later—whether communist parties attracting Shia support in the 1940s-1950s, or the Islamist movements in the 1970s-1980s, or the Shia parties that dominated post-2003 Iraq—all reflected this fundamental alienation from a state that had excluded Shia from power at its founding. The British created a state where the majority population viewed the government as illegitimate. This was not oversight but policy—British officials believed a minority-dominated government would be easier to control than one responsive to majority demands.

The Kurdish Question: Incorporation Without Consent

Kurdish populations in northern Iraq, numbering perhaps 1.0 to 1.2 million, never wanted to be part of Iraq. They wanted independence or at minimum autonomy within any state controlling their territory. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 had promised Kurds their own state, but this promise evaporated when Britain wanted Mosul's oil and Turkey wanted Kurdish territory. Kurds were forced into Iraq against their explicit wishes.

British policy toward Kurds combined coercion and cooptation. British forces suppressed Kurdish revolts demanding independence. RAF bombers struck Kurdish villages that resisted Iraqi government authority. Mahmud Barzanji, a Kurdish sheikh who led multiple revolts between

1919 and 1932, was defeated repeatedly by British forces, captured, imprisoned, and eventually forced into exile. His revolts failed not because Kurds supported Iraqi government but because British military power was overwhelming. Other Kurdish leaders were bought off—offered government positions, subsidies, and local autonomy in exchange for accepting Iraqi sovereignty. Some accepted, becoming Kurdish politicians within the Iraqi system. Their communities viewed them as collaborators.

The fundamental Kurdish grievance was that they constituted a distinct nation with their own language, culture, and identity, and they deserved self-determination just as Arabs did. British officials rejected this claim, arguing that Kurdish tribes were too divided to form a viable state, that Kurdish territory was too valuable strategically and economically to allow independence, and that maintaining regional stability required incorporating Kurds into existing states. The British also calculated that Kurdish alienation from Iraq would be useful—it meant the Iraqi government would always require British support to maintain control over its northern territories, ensuring continued British influence.

Kurdish alienation would produce six major revolts between 1943 and 1975, the brutal Anfal campaign that killed perhaps fifty thousand to one hundred thousand Kurds in 1988, and the current situation where Kurds maintain de facto independence in northern Iraq while remaining formally within the Iraqi state. All of this traces to the British decision in the 1920s to force Kurds into Iraq over their explicit objections in order to secure oil fields. The British bought temporary stability at the price of permanent instability.

Christians, Turkmen, and Other Minorities

Iraq's other minority communities faced varying situations under the mandate. Assyrian Christians, concentrated in the north, had sided with Britain during World War I and suffered Ottoman retaliation. After the war, Britain recruited Assyrians into levies serving as British auxiliary forces, creating a military force loyal to Britain rather than the Iraqi government. This made Assyrians useful to British interests but hated by Iraqi nationalists who viewed them as collaborators. When Britain ended the mandate in 1932, Assyrian levies lost their protectors. Iraqi Army units massacred perhaps six hundred Assyrians at Simele in 1933 in an atrocity that foreshadowed later ethnic violence. Britain did nothing—Assyrians had served their purpose and were now expendable.

Turkmen, Kurdish speakers of Turkish descent, were concentrated in northern cities including Kirkuk. They were caught between Kurdish, Arab, and Turkish identities, too small to assert independence but large enough to matter in Kirkuk's politics. The Iraqi government cultivated some Turkmen elites as counterweights to Kurdish nationalism. The pattern was typical—minorities were manipulated to serve state interests, played off against each other, and denied real power.

Jewish communities in Baghdad and other cities had lived in Iraq for millennia. Under the mandate, they continued as merchants, bankers, and professionals. The Iraqi government did not systematically persecute them during the mandate period. That would come later—after

Israeli state formation in 1948, Iraqi Jews faced increasing pressure, and most emigrated or fled by the early 1950s. But the mandate period established the pattern: Iraq was an Arab and Muslim state in which minorities would be tolerated but not granted full equality.

VI. Military and Security Forces: Creating the Coup Mechanism

The British created the Iraqi Army in 1921, recruiting and training forces that would supposedly defend Iraq but would actually become the primary threat to Iraqi political stability. The army's creation exemplified British priorities: they wanted military forces strong enough to suppress internal dissent and tribal unrest but not strong enough to threaten British interests or resist British power. They wanted an army loyal to the Iraqi government but dependent on British training, equipment, and advisory support. Most importantly, they wanted an army that would maintain order at acceptable cost to British taxpayers.

Composition and Structure

The Iraqi Army initially consisted of about 7,500 men organized into four infantry divisions and supporting units. Recruitment drew heavily from Sunni Arab populations, particularly ex-Ottoman officers who had served in the Ottoman army before its collapse. British officials justified this Sunni Arab dominance by arguing that Sunni Arabs had military experience from Ottoman service, that they spoke Arabic making them suitable for commanding troops, and that Iraq needed experienced officers immediately. These justifications obscured deliberate policy: the British wanted an officer corps drawn from the Sunni Arab elite they had selected to dominate Iraqi politics. An army commanded by Sunni Arabs would be unlikely to support Shia Arab or Kurdish challenges to the Sunni-dominated government.

Kurdish and Shia Arab recruitment occurred but at lower ranks. Enlisted men came from all communities, but promotion remained systematically biased toward Sunni Arabs. By the 1930s, perhaps eighty to ninety percent of officers were Sunni Arabs despite Sunni Arabs constituting only twenty to twenty-five percent of the population. This imbalance meant the army was not a national institution but a sectarian force dominated by a minority community. When that minority community lost political power—as it eventually would—the army's loyalty to the state became questionable.

British officers commanded Iraqi forces during the mandate period, with Iraqi officers serving as subordinates. RAF aircraft provided air support. British training missions instructed Iraqi officers in tactics, organization, and military professionalism. This training emphasized internal security operations and counter-insurgency tactics, not conventional military operations against external enemies. Iraq faced no realistic external military threats—Turkey accepted the northern boundary after 1926, Persia posed no threat, and Saudi Arabia was too weak to challenge Iraq.

The army's real purpose was suppressing internal dissent and projecting government authority over tribal areas and Kurdish regions.

Military Culture and Political Involvement

The Iraqi officer corps developed a distinctive culture that would shape Iraqi politics for seventy years. Many officers were Arab nationalists who believed in Arab unity and resented British imperialism. Military service gave them organizational skills, command experience, and access to weapons. They viewed themselves as modernizers and patriots, contrasting their supposed nationalism and efficiency with civilian politicians' corruption and subservience to British interests. This self-image as guardians of the nation rather than servants of the government would justify repeated military coups after independence.

The army's first major political intervention came in 1936 when General Bakr Sidqi led a coup against the elected government, establishing a pattern of military intervention in politics that would continue until 2003. But the seeds were planted during the mandate period. British officers taught Iraqi officers that military force existed to maintain order and protect the state. Iraqi officers concluded that if civilian governments were corrupt or incompetent or too subservient to foreign powers, the military had a duty to intervene. The British created a military with the capacity to seize power but without institutional constraints preventing it from doing so.

British officials recognized this danger. Multiple memoranda from the late 1920s warned that the Iraqi officer corps was becoming politically active and potentially unreliable. But addressing this would have required either democratizing the military by recruiting proportionally from all communities, or strengthening civilian institutions so they could control the military. The British did neither. Democratizing the military meant empowering Shia and Kurdish officers who might challenge British interests. Strengthening civilian institutions meant reducing British control over Iraqi government. The British chose to accept the risk of future military coups rather than make changes that would reduce British influence.

Police and Internal Security

Police forces operated primarily in cities, maintaining order through surveillance, arbitrary arrest, and periodic violence against protesters. The police were poorly trained, poorly paid, and often corrupt. British advisors controlled internal security policy during the mandate, ensuring police focused on threats to British interests—nationalist agitators, communist organizers, labor unions, anyone challenging the established order. After independence, Iraqi governments would use these same police forces to repress opposition, establishing patterns of authoritarian control.

Rural areas remained largely beyond police reach. Tribal areas were controlled through negotiations between government officials and tribal sheikhs, backed by the threat of military force if negotiation failed. The government lacked capacity for systematic rural administration. This weakness meant rural populations remained relatively autonomous, free from government

services but also free from government oppression. Urban populations had no such escape—they lived under direct government authority and police surveillance.

VII. Education: Training Collaborators

Education policy revealed British priorities with brutal clarity. If the mandate system genuinely aimed to prepare Iraqis for self-government, Britain would have invested heavily in universal education, rapidly expanding literacy and creating a educated citizenry capable of democratic participation. Instead, British education investment remained minimal, creating a small educated elite that could staff government administration while leaving the vast majority illiterate.

The Numbers

In 1920, perhaps five to eight percent of Iraq's population was literate. By 1932, literacy had increased to perhaps twelve to fifteen percent—a slight improvement but still catastrophically low. School enrollment tells a similar story. In 1920, perhaps fifteen thousand children attended school. By 1932, enrollment reached approximately forty-five thousand—threefold increase but still only about eight to ten percent of school-age children. These numbers meant that ninety percent of Iraqi children received no formal education during the entire mandate period.

Where were schools built? Overwhelmingly in urban areas, particularly Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. Rural education infrastructure remained minimal. The typical village had no school. Children of peasant families had no access to education beyond perhaps a Quranic teacher in the mosque providing basic religious instruction to boys. Girls received virtually no formal education—female literacy in 1932 was probably below five percent. The education system reproduced class inequality: children of elite families attended schools and acquired literacy that enabled professional careers, while children of poor families remained illiterate and trapped in agricultural labor or unskilled urban work.

The curriculum emphasized loyalty to the Iraqi state and respect for the monarchy, but also provided genuine education in Arabic literacy, mathematics, sciences, and history. The Iraqi government established secondary schools and a university, producing graduates who became teachers, doctors, lawyers, and engineers. This educated class would become the backbone of Iraqi professional society and would produce the nationalist movements demanding genuine independence. The British educated Iraqi elites well enough to desire independence but not broadly enough that mass education might threaten British control.

British Justifications

British officials justified minimal education investment with budget constraints. They argued that Iraq's limited revenue couldn't fund rapid education expansion, that building schools and training teachers took time, and that rushing education might produce unemployed educated youth who

would turn to radical politics. These arguments were self-serving. If Britain had prioritized education, they could have funded it—total education spending during the mandate period was perhaps £3-4 million, a pittance compared to British government spending elsewhere. British officials also worried that universal education might produce populations demanding democratic participation, workers organizing unions, and peasants demanding land reform. An illiterate population was easier to control than an educated one.

The most telling evidence of British priorities was educational spending compared to military and police spending. The Iraqi government spent perhaps ten to fifteen percent of its budget on education and forty to fifty percent on military and internal security. These ratios revealed what the government prioritized: maintaining order over developing human capital, controlling populations over serving them, protecting elite interests over expanding opportunity.

For the average family, education's absence meant continued illiteracy, exploitation through contracts they couldn't read, and inability to access information beyond what landlords, moneylenders, and government officials told them. It meant their children would face the same limited opportunities they had faced, perpetuating poverty and powerlessness across generations. The mandate period's education failure created human capital deficits that would constrain Iraqi development for decades.

VIII. Assessment of the Mandate Period: What Changed, What Didn't

By 1932, when Iraq achieved nominal independence, the mandate period's results were clear. Britain had created a state with the forms of sovereignty but not the substance. Iraq had a constitution, a parliament, a king, an army, a bureaucracy—all the institutional apparatus of an independent state. But British treaty obligations limited Iraqi foreign policy, British oil companies controlled Iraq's primary resource, British advisors shaped major decisions, and British military bases ensured British power remained available to protect British interests. Independence was juridical but not real.

The land tenure transformation created a class of large landowners who dominated rural Iraq. Land concentration increased from perhaps forty to fifty percent of agricultural land owned by elites in 1920 to sixty to seventy percent by 1932. The number of landless agricultural laborers and tenant farmers increased correspondingly. No land reform had occurred. The peasant families who worked the land surrendered approximately fifty to seventy percent of their harvest as rent and taxes, facing the same extraction levels they had under Ottoman rule or worse. Their hopes for land reform at independence were betrayed.

Oil production began near the mandate's end, with Kirkuk production starting in 1934. The concession terms ensured foreign companies captured most oil wealth while Iraqi government revenue remained minimal. This pattern would persist for decades, creating the resource curse

that would define Iraqi politics—elites fighting to control government because controlling government meant accessing oil revenue, oil wealth funding predation rather than development, and populations seeing no benefit from the resource riches beneath their feet.

Education expansion remained minimal. Ninety percent of Iraqi children still attended no school. Literacy rates improved modestly but most Iraqis remained illiterate. The education system served elite reproduction, training children of wealthy families for professional careers while leaving poor children trapped in their parents' poverty. Universal education that might have created an informed citizenry capable of democratic participation never materialized.

Infrastructure investment served British interests more than Iraqi development. Railways connected oil fields to ports. Roads remained primitive. Irrigation received minimal investment. Electricity, running water, and sewage systems existed only in limited urban areas. Public health infrastructure remained grossly inadequate. For the average person, material conditions improved little if at all compared to Ottoman times.

Political institutions created by the British were fundamentally unstable. A Sunni Arab minority dominated government, military, and administration, ruling over a Shia Arab majority and Kurdish minority who viewed the state as illegitimate. The military officer corps became politicized, seeing itself as guardian of the nation with the right to intervene when civilian governments failed. Constitutional structures provided mechanisms for elite competition but offered no path for popular participation or accountability. The Anglo-Iraqi treaties ensured that any government truly serving Iraqi interests rather than British interests would face British intervention.

The British claimed they had prepared Iraq for independence. The reality was they had created a state designed to serve British interests regardless of nominal sovereignty, built on minority domination and elite extraction, with institutions incapable of delivering services or commanding loyalty from populations, sitting atop oil wealth that would fuel conflict rather than development. This was not preparation for independence but engineering of permanent instability—instability that Britain could manage through indirect control, that would prevent Iraq from becoming strong enough to challenge British interests, and that would ensure Iraqi governments remained dependent on external support.

For the average Iraqi—the peasant working rented land, the urban laborer in Baghdad's slums, the tribal member watching his sheikh accumulate land, the Kurdish farmer wanting nothing to do with an Arab state—the mandate period brought little improvement and new oppressions. They had hoped British victory over the Ottomans might bring liberation. They received new masters. They had hoped independence in 1932 would bring land reform, education, opportunity. They received continued extraction under different flag. The British left behind institutions that would generate seventy years of coups, dictatorships, wars, and violence—not because Iraqis were incapable of self-governance, but because the British built a state incapable of governing justly.

END OF PART 2

Part 3 will examine information control, resistance suppression, and the lived experience of average people under mandate rule in greater detail, plus the transition to formal independence and early post-independence trajectories through the 1950s.

IRAQ CASE STUDY PART 3 OF 4

Control, Resistance, and the Illusion of Independence (1921-1958)

IX. Information Control and Narrative Management

The British understood that controlling physical territory required controlling the narratives that shaped how Iraqis understood their situation. This meant managing information flows, shaping education content, censoring opposition media, and constructing narratives that legitimized British rule while delegitimizing resistance. The British were remarkably sophisticated in these efforts, combining direct censorship with more subtle propaganda techniques that attempted to create consent for imperial rule.

Press Control and Censorship

Newspapers in Iraq during the mandate period operated under strict British supervision. The British established press laws requiring government licensing for publication, giving authorities power to shut down newspapers that published material threatening public order or British interests. These laws were enforced selectively. Newspapers supporting the government and British interests operated freely. Newspapers criticizing British policy or calling for immediate independence faced constant harassment—editors were arrested, publications were suspended, printing presses were seized. The message was clear: criticism within acceptable bounds was tolerated, but fundamental challenges to British authority would be crushed.

Baghdad hosted perhaps fifteen to twenty newspapers during the 1920s, most publishing irregularly due to financial constraints and government pressure. The most important nationalist newspaper was al-Istiqlal (Independence), which demanded immediate British withdrawal and genuine Iraqi sovereignty. British authorities shut it down repeatedly. Its editors were imprisoned multiple times. In 1924, when al-Istiqlal published articles calling the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty a betrayal of Iraqi independence, British officials arrested the editor and banned the newspaper for six months. When it resumed publication with similar content, authorities shut it down permanently. Other nationalist newspapers learned the lesson—moderate their criticism or face closure.

Pro-government newspapers received subsidies and government advertising, ensuring financial stability. The Iraqi government purchased thousands of copies of friendly newspapers for distribution to government offices and schools. Editors known to cooperate with British interests received privileged access to information and government officials. This created a loyal press

that published government perspectives while marginalizing critical voices. The British didn't need to control all media when they could ensure the loudest voices supported their interests.

Censorship extended to foreign publications. Newspapers and books from Egypt, Syria, and other Arab countries that contained anti-imperialist content were banned from import. British authorities monitored mail and confiscated material deemed subversive. This was particularly important because Egypt's vibrant press published extensively about Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and criticism of British policy. Iraqi intellectuals wanted access to these publications. The British prevented it, isolating Iraqi populations from broader Arab intellectual movements that might radicalize them.

The British also monitored and sometimes censored poetry and literature. Poetry held enormous cultural importance in Arab society—poets were public intellectuals whose work shaped opinion. Nationalist poets who wrote verses attacking British occupation or celebrating resistance faced surveillance. Some were imprisoned. Others fled to Syria or Egypt where they could write freely. The most famous case was Ma'ruf al-Rusafi, a poet and educator who lost his government position after publishing poems criticizing British policy. His experience warned other intellectuals that nationalist expression carried professional costs.

Education as Indoctrination

The school curriculum designed by Iraqi educators under British supervision walked a careful line. It taught Arabic literacy, Iraqi history, and geography, creating national consciousness. But it also emphasized loyalty to the monarchy, respect for established authority, and the benefits of gradual reform over revolutionary change. History textbooks described the Arab Revolt as liberation from Ottoman tyranny with British assistance, downplaying Arab nationalist aspirations for complete independence. Geography lessons described Iraq's resources and potential, but not the oil concession arrangements that gave those resources to foreign companies.

British advisors vetted Iraqi textbooks for content that might threaten British interests. References to imperialism, colonialism, or national liberation movements elsewhere received scrutiny. The British wanted education that created literate, competent administrators who would serve the state loyally. They didn't want education that created revolutionaries questioning the state's fundamental legitimacy. This tension—between education that develops critical thinking and education that produces obedient subjects—defined Iraqi educational policy throughout the mandate period.

Teachers became instruments of state control. The Iraqi government employed teachers, making them dependent on government salaries and subject to political pressure. Teachers known for nationalist sympathies faced dismissal. School administrators reported on teachers who expressed anti-government views. This created self-censorship—teachers understood that keeping their positions required avoiding politically sensitive topics. Students received education, but not the kind that might encourage them to challenge authority.

Religious education remained under clerical control but faced government interference. The Iraqi government subsidized religious schools that taught loyalty to the state alongside religious instruction. Clerics who opposed the government lost subsidies and sometimes faced arrest. The British and Iraqi government tried to co-opt religious authority rather than suppressing it entirely, understanding that Islam's social influence made outright confrontation dangerous. This strategy succeeded with some clerics who accepted government largesse and political quietism. It failed with others who maintained opposition to foreign occupation on religious grounds.

Radio and Public Communications

Iraq established radio broadcasting in the late 1920s, making it one of the first Middle Eastern countries with radio infrastructure. The government controlled broadcasting, using radio to disseminate official news and government propaganda. Radio programming included Quranic recitation, Arabic music, news bulletins emphasizing government achievements, and speeches by government officials. No opposition voices appeared on radio. The medium's power to reach illiterate populations made government control essential. A peasant who couldn't read newspapers could still hear radio broadcasts in coffee houses or public spaces. The British understood radio's propaganda potential and ensured the Iraqi government monopolized it.

Public ceremonies and rituals reinforced state authority. The king's birthday, independence day celebrations, and military parades demonstrated state power while encouraging loyalty. These events were carefully choreographed spectacles—troops marching, flags waving, crowds cheering on cue. British advisors helped design these ceremonies, understanding that visual displays of authority reinforced psychological control. The message was that the state was powerful, legitimate, and permanent. Resistance was futile.

The Counter-Narrative: Nationalist Opposition

Despite British efforts, Iraqi nationalist movements developed sophisticated counter-narratives challenging the legitimacy of British rule and the Iraqi government's collaboration. Nationalist intellectuals argued that the 1920 revolt had demonstrated Iraqi readiness for independence, that the Anglo-Iraqi treaties were imperial shackles disguised as partnership, that the Hashemite monarchy was a British creation without organic connection to Iraqi society, and that genuine independence required complete British withdrawal including military bases and oil concession renegotiation.

These narratives spread through informal networks that British censorship couldn't fully suppress. Coffee houses became spaces for political discussion where men gathered to talk, read newspapers together, and share information. Mosques provided venues for Friday sermons that sometimes contained veiled political messages. Poetry recitations in private gatherings allowed nationalist poets to share work they couldn't publish. Students at secondary schools and the university organized study groups discussing nationalist literature smuggled from Egypt and Syria. These spaces created parallel information ecosystems beyond British control.

The Iraqi Communist Party, founded in the 1930s, developed particularly effective propaganda emphasizing class exploitation alongside national oppression. Communist literature described landlords and British imperialists as partners extracting wealth from Iraqi workers and peasants. This message resonated with urban workers and landless peasants who experienced exploitation daily. The government repressed communists viciously, imprisoning organizers and banning publications, but communist ideas continued spreading through clandestine networks.

Nationalist movements also developed martyr narratives around those killed or imprisoned for opposing British rule. The ten thousand dead from the 1920 revolt became martyrs for independence. Executed nationalists became symbols of sacrifice. These narratives created historical memory of resistance that legitimized continued opposition. The British couldn't erase this history even when they controlled official education and media.

X. Resistance Suppression: The Mandate's Iron Fist

British control of Iraq rested ultimately on willingness to employ overwhelming violence against populations demanding independence. The 1920 revolt demonstrated this pattern—approximately ten thousand Iraqis killed to maintain British authority. But violence continued throughout the mandate period, though at lower intensity after 1920. The British developed systematic methods for suppressing resistance while minimizing British casualties and financial costs. Air power became the preferred tool—RAF bombers could terrorize rural populations at far lower cost than deploying army divisions.

Air Control Doctrine and Its Application

Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard developed the "air control" doctrine that Britain applied in Iraq, arguing that air power could maintain control over colonial territories more cheaply than ground forces. The theory was that bombing villages and tribal encampments would terrorize populations into submission without requiring expensive ground operations. Iraq became the testing ground where British officials refined these techniques that would later be applied elsewhere in the empire.

The Royal Air Force maintained eight squadrons in Iraq during the 1920s—perhaps eighty to one hundred aircraft including bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance planes. These aircraft were modern by 1920s standards and vastly superior to anything Iraqis possessed. RAF tactics involved bombing villages suspected of harboring rebels, strafing livestock and crops, destroying irrigation works, and dropping leaflets warning populations to submit or face destruction. The psychological effect was deliberate—populations living under the constant threat of bombardment without warning would be too terrorized to support resistance.

British officials were remarkably candid in internal documents about air control's purpose. A 1924 RAF memorandum stated: "The moral effect of bombing is out of all proportion to the

material damage inflicted. One raid demonstrating the government's ability to strike anywhere at any time does more to pacify a region than weeks of ground patrols." This was explicit acknowledgment that air power's value lay in terrorism—creating fear so overwhelming that resistance became unthinkable. Another memorandum from 1925 described operations against Kurdish villages: "The village of X was bombed yesterday with excellent results. Casualties are estimated at fifty to seventy-five killed. The tribe has requested peace terms." Fifty to seventy-five dead civilians was "excellent results" because it broke resistance.

Air Vice-Marshal John Salmond, commanding RAF forces in Iraq, described operations with satisfaction in his reports to London. A 1922 report stated: "Bombing has proved most effective. Tribes that previously defied ground forces submit after a few raids. The economic efficiency is remarkable—one aircraft operating for an hour achieves what would require a battalion operating for a week." This calculus of violence—measuring effectiveness in terms of cost per civilian terrorized—defined British counter-insurgency policy. Salmond continued: "We have had excellent cooperation from political officers who identify targets for bombing. Villages are warned to evacuate before bombing when possible, though in cases where speed is essential or the military situation precludes warning, bombing proceeds without warning."

Arthur Harris, later famous for directing the strategic bombing campaign against Germany during World War II, served in Iraq from 1922 to 1924 and learned lessons he would apply against German cities. Harris wrote approvingly about Iraq operations in his memoirs: "The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage. Within forty-five minutes a full-size village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured." This was not condemnation but boasting—Harris was proud of how efficiently RAF aircraft killed Iraqi civilians. He continued: "The use of delay-action bombs is particularly effective. Tribesmen returning to destroyed villages to recover possessions are killed by bombs that explode hours after the raid. This teaches them that resistance carries consequences."

Specific Operations and Their Human Costs

Multiple tribal uprisings occurred during the mandate period beyond the major 1920 revolt, each suppressed through air bombardment and ground operations. The Barzan Revolt of 1931-1932, led by Sheikh Ahmed Barzani in Kurdish regions, demanded Kurdish autonomy within Iraq and reform of the land tenure system. The Iraqi government, backed by RAF aircraft, suppressed the revolt through a campaign that destroyed dozens of villages and displaced thousands of people. RAF bombing killed perhaps three hundred to five hundred civilians directly, with many more dying from starvation and disease after their villages were destroyed and crops burned. The British justified this violence as necessary to maintain order and teach Kurds that resistance was futile.

Operations against the Marsh Arabs in southern Iraq demonstrated particular brutality. The Marsh Arabs lived in wetlands where the Tigris and Euphrates converged, subsisting on fishing, water buffalo herding, and reed harvesting. They maintained substantial autonomy from government authority, viewing themselves as independent communities. When they refused to pay taxes or recognize government authority, RAF aircraft bombed their reed houses and

machine-gunned water buffalo herds. A 1923 operation against Marsh Arab villages killed approximately one hundred to one hundred fifty people and destroyed the economic basis of several communities by killing their livestock. British justification was that Marsh Arabs needed to learn that government authority extended everywhere and that autonomous communities would not be tolerated.

The British also used collective punishment systematically. When a tribe killed a British officer or Iraqi government official, British forces would demand the tribe surrender those responsible and pay a collective fine. If the tribe refused, RAF aircraft bombed villages until compliance. Collective fines often bankrupted tribes, forcing them to sell livestock or land to raise required payments. This was deliberate policy—making resistance economically catastrophic for entire communities, not just individuals who fought. A British political officer explained the logic in a 1925 report: "Collective responsibility ensures that tribal elders restrain hot-headed young men from attacking government forces. When the entire tribe suffers for one man's actions, tribal mechanisms enforce compliance."

The British employed chemical weapons selectively during the mandate period, though less extensively than Churchill had advocated. Gas bombs were used against Kurdish villages in the early 1920s, causing casualties difficult to quantify but estimated at dozens to low hundreds. The British discontinued chemical weapons use after international criticism, though not from moral scruples. Conventional high explosives and machine guns proved sufficiently effective for terrorizing populations without generating diplomatic problems.

Legal Repression and Arbitrary Authority

Violence was not only military but also legal. The Iraqi government, under British supervision, employed emergency powers allowing detention without trial, deportation of troublemakers, collective fines, and summary execution for certain offenses. These powers were used systematically against nationalists, communists, labor organizers, and anyone deemed threatening to public order. The legal system provided a veneer of legitimacy for repression that was fundamentally arbitrary.

Political prisoners filled Iraqi jails throughout the mandate period. Nationalist leaders spent years in detention, often without formal charges or trial. The government would arrest someone, hold them for months or years, and release them only to arrest them again when they resumed political activity. This broke careers and families. Some prisoners faced torture—beatings, stress positions, sleep deprivation—to extract information or confessions. The British maintained they did not order torture, but they knew it occurred and did nothing to prevent it. British advisors prioritized effective intelligence gathering over humanitarian concerns.

Deportation was another tool. Leading nationalists and Shia clerics who posed particular threats faced expulsion to Iran or other countries. This removed opposition leaders from Iraq while avoiding the martyrdom that execution might create. Between 1920 and 1932, perhaps two hundred to three hundred significant opposition figures were deported. Some eventually returned. Others died in exile. The threat of deportation hung over anyone engaged in serious

opposition—you could lose everything, be torn from family and community, and dumped in a foreign country with no resources or support.

Tribal sheikhs who resisted government authority faced imprisonment and confiscation of property. The British would arrest rebellious sheikhs, imprison them for months or years, and recognize rival sheikhs from cooperative branches of the tribe. This divided tribes, creating loyalist factions that owed their position to government backing. When rebellious sheikhs were finally released, they often found their authority diminished and their rivals entrenched. This was deliberate strategy—using imprisonment and property confiscation to restructure tribal politics in government-friendly ways.

Why Resistance Failed

Iraqi resistance movements failed to dislodge British control for multiple reasons beyond British military superiority. First, resistance remained fragmented across sectarian, ethnic, and regional lines. Sunni Arab nationalists, Shia religious movements, Kurdish autonomy seekers, communist organizers, and tribal rebels never achieved unified action. Each group had different grievances and goals. The British exploited these divisions, negotiating with one group while suppressing another, playing Sunni against Shia, Arab against Kurd, settled populations against nomadic tribes. Unified Iraqi resistance might have made British control untenable. Divided resistance could be managed.

Second, some Iraqis collaborated with British rule, gaining wealth and power through cooperation. The Sunni Arab elite benefited from British-backed positions in government, military, and administration. Large landowners profited from land tenure policies. Tribal sheikhs received subsidies and official recognition. These groups had incentives to support the system rather than overthrow it. The British didn't need to suppress all Iraqis—they needed only to suppress those who resisted while rewarding those who cooperated.

Third, British military technology gave them overwhelming advantages. Iraqi resistance fighters had rifles and perhaps some machine guns. The British had aircraft, artillery, armored cars, modern communications, and professional military organization. A tribal force attacking a British garrison faced machine gun fire and artillery bombardment. RAF aircraft could strike anywhere without Iraqi forces having any capacity to defend against air attack. This asymmetry meant that resistance, while it could impose costs, could not actually win militarily.

Fourth, British control of the Iraqi government meant that resistance faced both British forces and Iraqi security forces. Iraqi police arrested nationalists. The Iraqi Army suppressed tribal revolts. This allowed the British to present resistance as rebellion against the legitimate Iraqi government rather than as national liberation against foreign occupation. Some Iraqis were conflicted—they opposed British imperialism but didn't want to fight against the Iraqi state and their fellow Iraqis serving in government forces. This moral complexity paralyzed some potential resisters.

Finally, resistance was exhausting and dangerous. The 1920 revolt killed ten thousand Iraqis. Subsequent uprisings killed hundreds more. Many more were imprisoned, tortured, exiled, or impoverished through collective fines. For the average person, resistance meant risking death, imprisonment, and family destruction. Most people chose accommodation—working within the system, accepting injustice, focusing on survival rather than liberation. This was rational calculation given the odds. The British counted on this rationality. Their violence was calibrated to make resistance seem futile, to convince populations that submission was the only viable option.

XI. What Life Was Actually Like: Average People Under the Mandate

Constitutional structures, oil concessions, and land tenure systems were abstractions that took on meaning only in how they shaped daily life. For the peasant family working rented land in the mid-Euphrates region, the merchant in Baghdad's suq, the Kurdish farmer in the northern mountains, or the Marsh Arab family in the southern wetlands, the mandate period meant specific experiences of labor, extraction, hope, and disappointment.

The Peasant's Year

The agricultural calendar structured life for the eighty to ninety percent of Iraqis who lived from farming. Autumn brought planting season—wheat and barley seeds went into soil after early rains softened the earth. The entire family participated. Men prepared fields, working with oxen or water buffalo to plow and prepare for planting. Women and children followed, scattering seed, covering it with soil, and praying for adequate rain. In irrigated areas, men maintained canals and managed water flow to fields. This work was unending—irrigation systems required constant maintenance, canals filled with silt, dikes needed repair, water distribution had to be negotiated with neighbors.

Winter brought relative rest but also cold and potential hunger. Families huddled in mud brick houses trying to stay warm, conserving food stocks, and hoping supplies would last until spring harvest. Winters when food ran short meant hunger—children's bellies swelling, weakness affecting everyone, the elderly and very young dying when nutrition couldn't sustain them through cold and disease. Winters when Ottoman or Iraqi tax collectors came demanding payment meant families selling precious possessions, animals, or future harvest shares to raise cash for taxes.

Spring meant anticipation as crops ripened. But it also meant anxiety—would rain come when needed? Would locusts descend and devour standing grain? Would flooding destroy crops? Would drought parch fields? Would disease strike livestock? Each of these disasters occurred regularly, turning what should have been harvest celebration into calamity. When crops failed, families faced debt to moneylenders who charged usurious interest. Debt accumulated across

generations. Families that fell too deep into debt lost their land use rights, becoming landless laborers, the bottom tier of rural hierarchy.

Harvest season brought the year's climax—weeks of dawn-to-dusk labor cutting grain, threshing, winnowing, and storing. Harvest determined whether the family would eat adequately for the next year or face hunger. But harvest also brought the moment of extraction. The landlord's agent arrived to claim his share—fifty to seventy percent of the harvest, as the rental agreement specified. The peasant family watched as the majority of what they had produced through a year's labor was carted away to the landlord's granaries. From what remained, they had to pay various fees, settle debts, purchase necessities, and feed themselves until the next harvest. For most families, what remained was subsistence-level—adequate in good years, insufficient in bad years, never enough to accumulate savings or improve their position.

The tenant farmer existed in perpetual insecurity. The landlord could refuse to renew rental agreements, evicting families from land they had cultivated for decades. They did this when they found more desperate tenants willing to pay higher rents, when land values increased making it profitable to replace tenants, or when tenants were perceived as troublesome. Eviction meant losing everything—the house, the fields, the community, the basis of survival. Evicted families migrated to cities where they joined the urban poor, or they moved to less desirable land accepting worse terms, or they became agricultural laborers with no land rights whatsoever. The fear of eviction kept tenant farmers compliant with landlord demands.

Urban Life: Baghdad's Growth and Its Discontents

Baghdad grew rapidly during the mandate period as rural migrants fled deteriorating rural conditions and sought opportunity in the city. The population increased from perhaps 150,000 in 1920 to approximately 300,000 by 1932—a doubling in twelve years. This growth occurred without adequate infrastructure or planning. New neighborhoods appeared without running water, sewage systems, or electricity. Slums spread across Baghdad's periphery—dense concentrations of poverty where families lived in makeshift housing, multiple families sharing small spaces, disease spreading easily through crowded conditions.

The fortunate found work as laborers, porters, craftsmen, domestic servants, or in the small industrial enterprises emerging in the city. Wages remained low—a typical laborer earned perhaps enough to feed his family with little left over. Most families needed multiple income sources to survive. Children worked when possible. Women took in laundry, sold food in markets, or worked as domestic servants in wealthy households. Economic security remained elusive—illness, injury, or unemployment plunged families into destitution.

Baghdad's middle class expanded modestly during the mandate period. Teachers, government clerks, shopkeepers, skilled craftsmen, and small merchants constituted perhaps ten to fifteen percent of urban population. They earned enough to rent decent housing, send children to school, and aspire to professional careers for the next generation. This class produced much of the nationalist movement's leadership. They were literate, aware of political developments, and

increasingly resentful that British control and elite extraction prevented Iraq from developing as it should.

The wealthy lived in a different city. Large merchants, landlords with urban residences, senior government officials, and professionals with European education lived in comfortable homes with modern amenities in Baghdad's better neighborhoods. They had electricity and running water. They could afford automobiles—the ultimate status symbol in the 1920s. Their children attended the best schools and sometimes studied abroad. They employed servants. They participated in a social world of dinner parties, cultural events, and political networking. For this class, the mandate period brought opportunity—those who cooperated with British authority and navigated the system skillfully accumulated wealth and influence.

Baghdad's suqs (markets) hummed with commerce. Merchants imported textiles, tea, sugar, and manufactured goods from British India and Europe, selling to urban consumers. Craftsmen produced traditional goods—copper vessels, leather goods, carpets, clothing. Coffee houses provided spaces where men gathered to talk, smoke water pipes, drink tea, and discuss politics. These institutions sustained social life and information exchange beyond government control. The British monitored coffee houses, fearing they might become organizing spaces for opposition, but could not suppress them without alienating urban populations.

Ethnic and Sectarian Experiences: Different Mandates

For Kurdish populations in the north, the mandate period meant forced incorporation into an Arab-dominated state they had never wanted. Kurdish farmers worked land they often owned as small proprietors—land concentration was less severe in Kurdish regions than in Arab areas. But they faced discrimination in government employment, suppression of Kurdish language and culture, and violent repression when they demanded autonomy. Many Kurdish families had relatives killed or imprisoned during the various Kurdish revolts. The mandate period created deep Kurdish alienation from the Iraqi state that would persist for a century.

Shia Arab populations experienced the mandate as minority rule by Sunni Arabs backed by British imperialism. Shia peasants working land owned by Sunni landlords understood that land tenure policies served Sunni elite interests. Shia families seeking government employment faced discrimination. Shia clerics opposed to British rule faced deportation. The Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala maintained some autonomy as religious centers, but Iraqi government authority pressed even there. For Shia Arabs, the mandate period confirmed that the Iraqi state was not their state, that it served others' interests, and that genuine representation would require overthrowing the existing system.

Assyrian Christians who had served as British levies faced catastrophe after 1932. The British had recruited Assyrians into military forces loyal to Britain rather than Iraq. Assyrian communities understood they had benefited from British protection and would be vulnerable after British withdrawal. When Iraq gained nominal independence and British protection decreased, Iraqi Army units massacred approximately six hundred Assyrians at Simele in August 1933. The British protested weakly but did nothing to prevent or punish the massacre.

Assyrian communities realized they had been used and abandoned. Many fled to Syria or other neighboring countries. Those who remained lived as frightened minorities in a state that viewed them with suspicion.

Jewish communities in Baghdad and other cities continued their traditional roles as merchants, bankers, craftsmen, and professionals during the mandate period. They faced no systematic persecution in these years—the Jewish community was too well-established and economically important for the Iraqi government to attack them. But subtle discrimination existed in government employment and social relations. After 1948, when Israel was established, Iraqi Jews would face intense pressure and most would emigrate or flee. But during the mandate period, their situation remained relatively stable even as they understood their position as religious minority in a Muslim-majority state was inherently insecure.

Women's Lives: The Invisible Majority

Women's experiences during the mandate period remain underrecorded in historical sources because women's lives were considered unimportant by male chroniclers. But fragmentary evidence suggests what life was like for most women. Rural women's labor was essential to household survival—they prepared food, drew water, cared for children, made clothing, processed agricultural products, tended gardens, and worked in fields during planting and harvest. This labor was uncompensated and often unrecognized. When men spoke of agricultural production, they meant their own labor in fields. Women's work was invisible even though it was equally essential.

Women bore and raised children in conditions of high mortality. Perhaps forty percent of children died before age five. This meant most women experienced the death of at least one child, many experienced multiple deaths, and the grief and trauma of watching children die from disease, malnutrition, or preventable conditions. Childbirth was dangerous—perhaps one to two percent of births resulted in maternal death. Women who survived multiple births often suffered permanent health damage.

Most women received no formal education. Female literacy was perhaps three to five percent during the mandate period. This meant women could not read contracts, could not verify accounts, could not access written information, and depended on male relatives for interaction with literate society. A few elite urban families sent daughters to school, and a handful of women became teachers or nurses. But for the vast majority, education remained inaccessible.

Urban women from middle-class and wealthy families lived under social restrictions that rural women escaped by necessity. Veiling was common in cities, though practices varied by class and family. Women from wealthy families rarely appeared in public, living lives confined to household spaces. Women from poor families could not afford such restriction—they worked in markets, as domestic servants, or in other income-generating activities out of necessity. The British were not particularly concerned with women's status—British officials occasionally mentioned women's education as an area requiring future attention, but actual investment remained minimal.

Health, Disease, and Death

Public health conditions during the mandate period remained appalling by any standard. Infant mortality was catastrophically high—three hundred to four hundred deaths per thousand live births was typical. This meant that in every village, multiple children died every year from preventable diseases. Cholera, typhus, dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis, and other diseases killed thousands annually. The Iraqi government maintained a few hospitals in major cities, but rural health infrastructure was almost nonexistent.

British health investments focused on protecting British personnel and maintaining army fitness, not serving Iraqi populations. The British established a few modern hospitals in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, but these facilities primarily served British officials, wealthy Iraqis who could afford private care, and army personnel. The average Iraqi peasant or urban laborer had no access to modern medicine. When illness struck, traditional healers provided what assistance they could. Recovery depended on individual constitution, chance, and whatever folk remedies existed. Many illnesses that modern medicine could easily treat—bacterial infections, parasitic diseases, nutritional deficiencies—killed or crippled people.

Life expectancy probably remained around thirty-five to forty years for those who survived childhood. This didn't mean most people died in their thirties—rather, high infant mortality dragged down the average. Those who survived childhood might live to fifty or sixty if fortunate. But many didn't—disease, malnutrition, workplace accidents, war, and violence killed people throughout their lives. For women, childbirth added additional risk. For men, military service, labor accidents, and violence raised mortality.

The mandate period brought no systematic improvement in public health. The British built no rural clinics, established no public health campaigns, invested minimally in disease prevention. They might have built hundreds of rural health clinics, trained thousands of healthcare workers, established vaccination programs, and dramatically reduced mortality. Instead, they built railways to oil fields and maintained military bases. The health investment that might have saved tens of thousands of Iraqi lives never occurred because Iraqi welfare was not a British priority.

XII. The Transition to Nominal Independence (1930-1932)

Iraq's transition to independence in October 1932 was carefully managed theater. Britain granted nominal independence while preserving control over matters of substance. The 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty established the framework—Iraq would be independent, join the League of Nations, and conduct its own foreign relations, but would maintain military alliance with Britain, grant Britain military basing rights, consult Britain on all foreign policy, and protect British oil interests. This was independence that left Britain controlling everything important.

The Politics of Independence

Iraqi nationalists were divided about independence on British terms. Some argued that any independence was better than continued mandate status, that Iraq could build on nominal independence to eventually achieve real sovereignty, and that rejecting the 1930 treaty would prolong British occupation indefinitely. Others argued that accepting the treaty made a mockery of independence, that it legitimized British control while removing international oversight through the mandate system, and that Iraq should reject the treaty and demand genuine independence even if that prolonged the struggle.

Nuri al-Said, who negotiated the 1930 treaty as prime minister, argued forcefully that accepting British terms was pragmatic necessity. Iraq was militarily weak, financially dependent, and internally divided. Challenging Britain directly would bring only British intervention and continued occupation. Accepting British terms gave Iraq juridical independence, League of Nations membership, and international recognition. From that foundation, Iraq could gradually expand its autonomy. Nuri believed this approach was more likely to succeed than futile confrontation.

Opposition came from multiple directions. Yasin al-Hashimi and his supporters wanted harder negotiating with Britain, extraction of more concessions, and refusal to sign until British military presence was scheduled for complete withdrawal. Communist and leftist movements denounced the treaty as capitulation, arguing that it preserved British imperial domination in new form. Kurdish leaders pointed out that the treaty did nothing to address Kurdish demands for autonomy. Tribal leaders opposed to the government viewed the treaty as irrelevant—the government's legitimacy was the issue, not its technical independence status.

Public opinion in Baghdad turned hostile when the treaty's terms became fully known. University students organized protests. Nationalist newspapers published blistering critiques. Street demonstrations demanded rejection of the treaty. The Iraqi government responded with repression—protest leaders were arrested, newspapers were shut down, police broke up demonstrations with violence. The British supported this repression, understanding that the treaty could not be renegotiated and that Iraqi acceptance was essential for British strategy.

The British pushed Iraq's independence primarily to reduce costs and improve optics. Maintaining direct mandate control was expensive and generated international criticism. Granting nominal independence while preserving real control through treaties accomplished British objectives at lower cost and with better public relations. The League of Nations would no longer scrutinize British policy in Iraq. British officials could claim they had fulfilled their mandate obligations by preparing Iraq for independence. But British forces would remain in bases, British advisors would continue shaping policy, and British oil companies would maintain their concessions.

What Independence Meant in Practice

Iraq formally achieved independence on October 3, 1932, when the League of Nations admitted Iraq as a member state—the first former mandate territory to achieve this status. The day

featured celebrations in Baghdad—parades, speeches, flags flying. King Faisal proclaimed a new era of Iraqi sovereignty. Government officials praised British assistance in preparing Iraq for independence while asserting Iraq's newfound freedom. The British High Commissioner, now to be called Ambassador, congratulated Iraq on this achievement while reminding Iraqis of the continuing British-Iraqi partnership.

The reality beneath the ceremony was that little had changed. British forces remained in four air bases—at Habbaniya near Baghdad and at Shaiba near Basra, plus two smaller facilities. These bases could house substantial British forces and served as staging points for reinforcement from India or Egypt if needed. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty obligated Iraq to allow British forces to cross Iraqi territory during wartime and to provide facilities and supplies to British forces. This meant Iraq had no independent military policy—if Britain went to war, Iraq would automatically become involved regardless of Iraqi interests.

British advisors in Iraqi ministries, officially called "advisors" rather than "administrators" to maintain the independence façade, continued shaping policy in finance, interior affairs, and economic matters. Their advice was functionally mandatory—Iraqi ministers who ignored British advisors found their policies blocked through various mechanisms. The British also maintained intelligence networks monitoring Iraqi politics, identifying threats to British interests, and coordinating with Iraqi security services to suppress anti-British activity.

Oil concession terms remained unchanged. The Iraq Petroleum Company maintained exclusive extraction rights under terms negotiated during the mandate. When oil production began in 1934, revenue flows favored the company overwhelmingly. Iraq received modest royalties while the company earned substantial profits. Iraqi demands to renegotiate oil terms faced British resistance backed by treaty obligations to protect British commercial interests.

For average Iraqis, independence brought no material improvement. Land tenure remained unchanged—landlords kept their estates, peasants remained tenants and sharecroppers. Tax systems remained regressive. Education expansion continued at minimal pace. Public health investment remained inadequate. Infrastructure development served elite and commercial interests. The government employed thousands of officials and maintained military forces, but provided few services to common people. Independence changed the flag and the terminology, not the reality of elite extraction and popular deprivation.

XIII. Early Post-Independence Trajectories (1932-1958)

The quarter century between independence and the 1958 revolution revealed the consequences of mandate engineering. Iraq experienced periodic instability, multiple coups, continued British influence transitioning to American influence after 1945, growing nationalist and communist movements demanding genuine change, and chronic failure to address

fundamental problems of land concentration, poverty, and minority grievances. The structures the British had created proved unable to generate stable governance or inclusive development.

The Monarchy's Increasing Fragility

King Faisal I died in 1933, shortly after independence. His son Ghazi I succeeded him, ruling until his death in a car accident in 1939. Ghazi was more nationalist than his father, publicly criticizing British influence and supporting pan-Arab movements. British officials viewed him with suspicion and were privately relieved when he died. Many Iraqis suspected British involvement in his death, though evidence remains inconclusive. Ghazi's death put his four-year-old son Faisal II on the throne with Abd al-Ilah, Faisal's uncle, serving as regent until 1953. Abd al-Ilah was completely pro-British, ensuring the monarchy remained aligned with British interests during the crucial World War II years.

The monarchy's legitimacy eroded steadily. The Hashemites had no organic connection to Iraq—they were outsiders installed by Britain. They depended on British backing and elite support, not popular loyalty. As nationalist sentiment grew, particularly after World War II, the monarchy's association with British imperialism became political liability. The monarchy also represented the old order of landlord power, military dominance, and Sunni Arab privilege. For Shia Arabs, Kurds, communists, and nationalists, the monarchy symbolized everything that needed to change.

Military Coups and Political Instability

The Iraqi military's first coup occurred in 1936 when General Bakr Sidqi overthrew the elected government. This established the pattern—the military saw itself as guardian of the nation with the right to intervene when civilian government failed. Sidqi's coup was motivated by military grievances over budget cuts and by his personal ambition, but it was justified through nationalist rhetoric about cleansing government of corrupt politicians and implementing genuine reform. The coup succeeded easily—military forces seized control of Baghdad, arrested government leaders, and installed a new government with Sidqi controlling policy behind the scenes.

Sidqi's government lasted less than a year before rival military factions assassinated him and overthrew his government in 1937. This initiated a period of chronic instability where different military factions and political groups competed for power through coups and counter-coups. Between 1936 and 1941, Iraq experienced multiple military coups and numerous cabinet changes. This instability demonstrated that the political institutions the British had created could not manage elite competition peacefully. Violence and military intervention became normal politics.

The Golden Square coup of April 1941 brought to power military officers sympathetic to Nazi Germany. This occurred during World War II when Britain was fighting Germany. The new government sought to reduce British influence and potentially align with the Axis powers. The British responded with military intervention—British forces from Transjordan invaded Iraq in May 1941, defeated Iraqi forces, reinstalled a pro-British government, and occupied Iraq until 1945.

This intervention demonstrated Iraq's lack of genuine sovereignty. When an Iraqi government challenged British interests, the British simply overthrew it by force.

The Wathbah Uprising (1948) and Growing Popular Discontent

The Wathbah (meaning "leap" or "uprising") of January 1948 represented the most significant popular challenge to the government between independence and 1958. Students, workers, and political activists protested against the Portsmouth Treaty—a revised version of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty that would have maintained British military presence in Iraq for another twenty-five years. Protesters demanded rejection of the treaty, genuine independence free from British control, and domestic reforms addressing land concentration and poverty.

The government responded with violence. Police fired on demonstrators, killing perhaps three hundred to four hundred people over several days. This massacre radicalized many Iraqis, particularly students who had participated in protests. The government eventually backed down and rejected the Portsmouth Treaty, but the violence had demonstrated that the regime would kill its own citizens to maintain power. The Wathbah created a generation of activists convinced that the existing system could not be reformed but needed to be overthrown.

The Iraqi Communist Party grew rapidly in the late 1940s and 1950s, attracting support from workers, intellectuals, and Shia Arabs alienated from Sunni-dominated government. The party organized labor unions, led strikes, and demanded land reform, wealth redistribution, and genuine democracy. The government repressed communists viciously—thousands were imprisoned, many were tortured, party leaders faced execution. But repression couldn't eliminate the movement because its message resonated with populations experiencing exploitation and marginalization.

Land Reform: The Failure to Address Fundamental Injustice

Land concentration increased during the early post-independence period. By the 1950s, approximately one to two percent of landowners controlled perhaps seventy-five percent of agricultural land. Absentee landlordism was common—wealthy families owning estates they never visited, extracting rents through agents who had every incentive to maximize extraction. Rural poverty intensified as population grew while land tenure remained unchanged. The landless rural population swelled—by the 1950s, perhaps half the rural population worked as agricultural laborers with no land rights.

Iraqi nationalists, communists, and liberal reformers all demanded land reform. They argued that Iraqi development required breaking landlord power, distributing land to peasant farmers, and creating an agricultural sector based on small and medium-sized family farms. Egypt implemented land reform after the 1952 revolution, demonstrating that Arab states could redistribute land. Syria would implement reforms in the 1960s. But Iraqi governments blocked land reform throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s because large landowners constituted the government's core support. Nuri al-Said and other leaders were themselves large landowners or

closely connected to landlord families. They could not implement land reform without destroying their own power base.

The failure to implement land reform before 1958 proved catastrophic. When the 1958 revolution overthrew the monarchy, the new government implemented radical land reform that broke landlord power but also disrupted agricultural production. Land reform implemented in the 1930s or 1940s, while resistance was less entrenched and the transition could have been managed gradually, might have prevented later violence and economic disruption. But the elite's unwillingness to sacrifice their own interests for national development meant reform came only through revolution.

Oil Revenue and Elite Enrichment

Oil production expanded dramatically in the late 1940s and 1950s as global demand increased. Iraqi oil production reached approximately one million barrels per day by the late 1950s, generating substantial revenue for the Iraqi government. This should have funded development—massive investment in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and industrialization that would have transformed Iraqi society. Instead, much oil revenue was captured by elites through corruption, spent on military expansion, or wasted on prestige projects that benefited few.

The Iraq Development Board, established in 1950 to allocate oil revenue for development, funded some genuine projects—dams, irrigation works, roads, schools, hospitals. But allocation favored regions and populations connected to power while neglecting others. Kurdish regions received minimal investment. Rural areas remained underserved. Urban slums grew without adequate housing or services. Much spending went to showcase projects that generated publicity but limited social benefit—large dams that displaced communities, urban renewal projects that served wealthy neighborhoods, military facilities.

Elite families accumulated fortunes through oil-related contracts and corruption. Government officials, military officers, and landlord families used their positions to capture rents from oil wealth. They built mansions in Baghdad's best neighborhoods, sent children to European universities, accumulated wealth they deposited in foreign banks, and lived in luxury while the majority remained poor. This gap between elite consumption and popular deprivation became increasingly visible and increasingly resented. Oil wealth was supposed to develop Iraq. Instead, it enriched the few while bypassing the many.

Foreign Policy and the Baghdad Pact

Iraq's foreign policy remained aligned with British interests through the 1950s despite growing nationalist sentiment. The Baghdad Pact of 1955, a military alliance between Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Britain (with American support), exemplified this alignment. The pact aimed to contain Soviet influence in the Middle East during the Cold War. For Iraqi nationalists, the Baghdad Pact represented continued subordination to Western imperialism—Iraq joining Western military alliances rather than pursuing non-aligned or Arab nationalist foreign policy.

The pact generated enormous domestic opposition. Nationalists denounced Nuri al-Said's government for subordinating Iraqi interests to Western powers. Pan-Arabists argued Iraq should align with Egypt's Nasser, who was leading Arab nationalism and non-alignment. Communists viewed the pact as imperialist encirclement of the Soviet Union. Street protests against the pact brought police violence and mass arrests. The government pushed forward regardless, believing Western alliance protected Iraqi security and provided economic benefits.

The Baghdad Pact's unpopularity contributed to the regime's delegitimization. Iraqis watched as Nasser in Egypt defied Western powers, nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, and survived Anglo-French-Israeli military intervention. Nasser became a hero across the Arab world as the leader who stood up to imperialism. Meanwhile, Iraq's government aligned with the same Western powers that had invaded Egypt. This contrast made the Iraqi monarchy appear as Western puppet while Egypt represented authentic Arab nationalism. The gap between what Iraqis wanted (Arab unity, anti-imperialism, genuine independence) and what their government delivered (Western alliance, continued British influence, elite extraction) became unbridgeable.

The 1958 Revolution: Mandate Structures Collapse

On July 14, 1958, military officers calling themselves the Free Officers Movement launched a coup that overthrew the monarchy, executed King Faisal II and Abd al-Ilah, killed Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, and established a republic. The coup succeeded within hours—army units seized key positions in Baghdad, crowds celebrated in the streets, and the old regime collapsed without significant resistance. The revolution's ease demonstrated how hollow the monarchy had become—it commanded no popular loyalty and couldn't defend itself when the military turned against it.

The revolution represented the delayed reckoning for structures the British had created. The Hashemite monarchy—installed by Britain and maintained by British backing—was overthrown. The Sunni Arab elite dominance—engineered by British policy—faced challenge from military officers who promised inclusive nationalism. The British alliance—the foundation of Iraqi foreign policy since 1921—was repudiated as Iraq aligned with Arab nationalism and non-alignment. The land tenure system—preserved by the British and maintained by Iraqi elites—faced radical reform as the new government redistributed estates. The old order that the British had built collapsed in a single day.

The revolution's leader, Abdul Karim Qasim, was a military officer from a modest background, part Sunni Arab and part Shia Arab, representing the Iraqi middle class that had been excluded from power. Qasim promised land reform, Iraqi nationalism over pan-Arabism, inclusion of Shia and Kurds in government, and development serving the masses rather than elites. The early euphoria surrounding the revolution reflected decades of pent-up frustration with the old system. Iraqis believed, however naively, that overthrowing the monarchy would allow Iraq to finally develop as it should.

But the revolution also unleashed forces that would produce chronic instability for the next fifty years. The destruction of the old order didn't automatically create a new order. Different

factions—Arab nationalists, communists, Kurds, Islamists, rival military officers—competed to shape Iraq's future. The military, having established that force could determine power, would continue using force. Iraq entered a period of coups, counter-coups, and authoritarian rule that would culminate in Ba'athist dictatorship. The structures the British had created were gone, but the problems they had created—sectarian divisions, military politicization, oil wealth divorced from development, Kurdish alienation, elite extraction—persisted.

The mandate period's legacy was not merely that British rule ended badly, but that British engineering had created a state structurally incapable of stable governance. The boundaries that combined populations without historical unity, the constitutional structures that privileged minority over majority, the economic systems that concentrated wealth rather than distributing it, the military institutions that learned to seize power rather than defend the state, the oil concessions that funneled wealth to foreign companies, the educational failures that left populations illiterate—all these British choices created path dependencies that proved impossible to overcome through reform and could be addressed only through revolution. And when revolution came, it produced not stability but chaos, because the underlying structural problems remained.

END OF PART 3

Part 4 will trace Iraq from the 1958 revolution through Ba'athist dictatorship, the Iran-Iraq War, Gulf Wars, American invasion, sectarian civil war, and the rise of ISIS to 2025, connecting current conditions to mandate-era engineering.

IRAQ CASE STUDY PART 4 OF 4

From Revolution to Collapse: The Mandate's Long Shadow (1958-2025)

XIV. Revolutionary Chaos and the Failure of Reform (1958-1968)

The 1958 revolution destroyed the British-created order in a single day but could not overcome the structural problems that order had embedded in Iraqi society. Abdul Karim Qasim, the revolution's leader, promised to build a new Iraq based on social justice, inclusive nationalism, and development serving the masses rather than elites. He faced impossible challenges: a military that had learned power came from force, sectarian and ethnic divisions that the British had institutionalized, oil wealth that encouraged predation rather than development, and regional powers that viewed Iraq as arena for their own rivalries. Qasim's government implemented genuine reforms but also triggered conflicts that would destroy him and plunge Iraq into chronic instability.

Land Reform: Breaking the Landlords

Qasim's government implemented radical land reform in September 1958, just two months after the revolution. The reform law limited individual land ownership to approximately six hundred hectares of irrigated land or twelve hundred hectares of rain-fed land, with variations based on land quality and crop type. Land above these limits was confiscated with compensation and redistributed to landless peasants and small farmers. This was the fundamental restructuring that Iraqi nationalists had demanded since the 1920s and that the monarchy had blocked for three decades.

The reform broke landlord power. The great estates that British policy had created and that Iraqi elites had preserved were seized. Approximately seventy-five percent of agricultural land changed hands over the next several years as the government implemented the law. Landless peasants received plots, though often smaller than promised. The former landlord class—families like those that had dominated rural Iraq since the 1920s—lost their economic base. Some fled to cities. Others adapted by investing in urban real estate or industry. Their political power was shattered permanently.

But land reform created new problems. The government lacked administrative capacity to survey land, register new owners, and provide credit and technical assistance to new farmers. Redistribution proceeded chaotically. Some peasants received good land with adequate water. Others received marginal plots. Many redistributed plots were too small for commercial farming,

keeping families at subsistence level. Agricultural production declined in the early 1960s as the transition disrupted established patterns. The government had broken the old system without fully building a new one.

For peasant families who received land, reform was transformative despite problems. After generations of paying fifty to seventy percent of harvest as rent, they now owned their plots and kept all production after taxes. This meant more food, better housing, ability to invest in improvements, and dignity of ownership. Many families remembered land reform as the moment their lives fundamentally improved. But production problems and government dysfunction meant reform's full potential was never realized. Iraq remained a predominantly agricultural economy with chronic agricultural underperformance.

Conflicts with Kurds: The Unresolved National Question

Qasim's government initially promised Kurds genuine autonomy within Iraq, recognizing Kurdish language and culture and offering government positions to Kurdish leaders. But the relationship deteriorated rapidly. Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani demanded autonomy that approached independence—Kurdish control over Kurdish regions including oil-rich Kirkuk, Kurdish language as official language in Kurdish areas, Kurdish military forces, and revenue sharing from Kurdish oil. Qasim could not grant these demands without effectively partitioning Iraq. The conflict erupted into war in 1961.

The First Kurdish War (1961-1970, continuing beyond Qasim's rule) demonstrated patterns that would repeat for decades. The Iraqi Army launched offensives into Kurdish mountains, capturing valleys and towns but unable to hold territory against Kurdish guerrilla resistance. Kurdish peshmerga fighters knew the terrain, had community support, and fought for their homeland. Iraqi forces suffered heavy casualties and achieved no permanent gains. The government bombed Kurdish villages, displaced populations, and committed atrocities, but could not defeat the Kurdish movement militarily. By 1963, when Qasim was overthrown, the war had killed thousands and displaced tens of thousands without resolving anything.

This conflict traced directly to British mandate decisions. The British had forced Kurds into Iraq over explicit Kurdish objections to secure Mosul's oil. They had created a state where Arabs dominated government while Kurds constituted perhaps fifteen to twenty percent of population with distinct identity and territory. No Iraqi government could grant Kurds genuine autonomy without losing control over northern Iraq and its oil. No Kurdish movement could accept permanent subordination to Arab government. The British had created an irreconcilable contradiction that would generate six major Kurdish wars, tens of thousands of deaths, and permanent instability.

Qasim's Overthrow and the Ba'ath Party's First Coup (1963)

Qasim was overthrown and executed in February 1963 by a coalition of Ba'athist and Arab nationalist military officers who viewed him as insufficiently committed to Arab unity and too friendly toward communists. The coup was extraordinarily violent—thousands of communists

and Qasim supporters were arrested, tortured, and executed in the days following. The CIA provided lists of communists to the new government, facilitating the purge. This was the first of many instances where Iraqi politics would be shaped by Cold War dynamics and external intervention.

The Ba'ath Party had formed in Syria in the 1940s, spreading to Iraq in the 1950s as a movement combining Arab nationalism, socialism, and secularism. Iraqi Ba'athists attracted military officers, teachers, students, and middle-class professionals who wanted radical change but opposed communism. The party was small but disciplined, organized in cells that could operate clandestinely. The 1963 coup gave Ba'athists their first taste of power. They used it to eliminate enemies, reward supporters, and attempt to implement their ideology of Arab unity and socialist transformation.

But the Ba'athists held power only nine months before rival Arab nationalist officers overthrew them in November 1963. This initiated a period of extreme instability where different military factions seized power through coups every few years. Between 1963 and 1968, Iraq experienced multiple coups and counter-coups, governments rising and falling, military officers killing each other in power struggles. This chaos demonstrated that destroying the old order had not created a new stable order. The military remained the arbiter of power, and military factions competed violently for control.

For average Iraqis, this period brought continued hardship. Governments focused on consolidating power rather than delivering services. The economy stagnated as political instability deterred investment. The Kurdish war continued, consuming resources and killing Iraqis. Land reform implementation slowed and eventually stalled. Education and healthcare expansion that Qasim had begun lost momentum. Urban populations experienced food shortages, inflation, and unemployment. Rural populations faced government neglect. The revolution's promise of development serving the masses remained unfulfilled.

XV. Ba'athist Consolidation and Saddam's Rise (1968-1979)

The Ba'ath Party returned to power in July 1968 through another military coup, this time led by Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr with Saddam Hussein as his deputy. Unlike the 1963 coup, the Ba'athists now understood that holding power required systematic elimination of rivals, creation of security apparatus to detect and crush opposition, and construction of ideological legitimacy beyond military force. Over the next eleven years, the Ba'ath Party consolidated authoritarian control more thoroughly than any previous Iraqi government, building a regime that would survive for thirty-five years.

Building the Security State

Saddam Hussein, serving as vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, built Iraq's security apparatus with meticulous brutality. Multiple intelligence services competed and monitored each other—the Mukhabarat (General Intelligence), the Amn al-Amm (General Security), the Istikhbarat (Military Intelligence), and the Special Security Organization reporting directly to Saddam. These services employed tens of thousands of informants who reported on colleagues, neighbors, and even family members. Iraqis learned that speaking carelessly could mean arrest, torture, and execution. The paranoia was deliberate—when everyone feared everyone else, collective action became impossible.

Torture was systematic and scientific. The Ba'ath regime employed torture specialists who studied how to inflict maximum pain while keeping victims alive for continued interrogation. Methods included beatings with cables and rods, electric shocks to genitals and other sensitive areas, suspension from ceilings for hours, crushing of hands and feet, rape, and forcing prisoners to watch family members tortured. Some torture chambers had one-way mirrors so security officials could observe. The regime documented torture through photographs and videos, creating archives of suffering that reinforced agents' desensitization and demonstrated consequences of opposition.

Thousands disappeared into the regime's prisons, never to be seen again. Families received no information about arrested relatives. Bodies were not returned. Gravesites remained unknown. This created terror beyond the fear of death—loved ones simply vanished, and families never learned their fate. The uncertainty was part of the punishment, keeping families paralyzed by hope that perhaps their relative was still alive somewhere. Decades later, after the regime's fall, mass graves containing thousands of bodies would be discovered across Iraq.

Public executions served as spectacle demonstrating regime power. The regime televised executions of accused spies, traitors, and regime opponents. Crowds were assembled to watch hangings. The message was clear: the state had absolute power over life and death, resistance was futile, and even thinking about opposition could mean death. In 1969, the regime publicly hanged fourteen people in Baghdad's Liberation Square, accusing them of being Israeli spies. The bodies were left hanging for hours while crowds were encouraged to celebrate. This was not justice but theater of cruelty designed to terrorize populations into submission.

Oil Nationalization and the Resource Curse

The Ba'ath regime nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1972, seizing foreign-owned oil facilities and ending the concession arrangements established during the British mandate. This was enormously popular—Iraqis had resented seeing their oil wealth flow to foreign companies for decades. Nationalization meant Iraq would control its oil and capture all revenue. Combined with rising oil prices in the 1970s, particularly after the 1973 oil shock, Iraq's oil revenue increased from approximately $600 million in 1970 to over $26 billion by 1980. This revenue surge should have transformed Iraq through massive investment in development.

Instead, oil wealth financed regime consolidation and elite enrichment. The military received lavish funding—Iraq built one of the largest armies in the Middle East, purchasing advanced

weapons from the Soviet Union and Western countries. Military spending consumed perhaps thirty to forty percent of government budget. The security services received unlimited resources to maintain domestic control. The Ba'ath Party distributed patronage to supporters through government jobs, subsidies, and access to contracts. Baghdad's infrastructure improved dramatically—highways, bridges, government buildings, palaces for Saddam and other leaders. But rural areas remained underserved. Southern Iraq, predominantly Shia, received minimal investment despite being home to perhaps fifty percent of the population.

The regime used oil wealth to buy political support through subsidies and jobs. Food prices were kept artificially low through government subsidies. Gasoline was practically free. Government employment expanded to perhaps one million workers by the late 1970s—perhaps fifteen percent of the total population on government payroll. This created dependency—families needed government employment to survive, making them complicit in regime maintenance. But it also created inefficiency and corruption. Government agencies employed far more workers than needed. Productivity was low. Corruption was endemic as officials demanded bribes to process paperwork or deliver services.

Oil wealth also enabled the regime to ignore agricultural and industrial development. Iraq imported food rather than investing in agricultural productivity. Manufacturing remained limited beyond oil refining and military industries. The economy became a rentier state—one where government captured oil rents and distributed them through patronage networks rather than generating wealth through productive economic activity. This created vulnerability to oil price fluctuations and ensured that when oil prices collapsed in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, the economy would collapse with them.

Saddam's Consolidation of Personal Power

Saddam Hussein maneuvered carefully through the 1970s to position himself as inevitable successor to aging President al-Bakr. He built personal loyalty networks within the military and security services, rewarding supporters and removing potential rivals. He placed relatives from Tikrit, his hometown, in key security positions, creating a core of loyalty based on clan and family ties. His cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid became one of his most brutal enforcers. His half-brothers received important positions. This tribalization of power contradicted Ba'athist ideology of secular Arab nationalism, but Saddam understood that family loyalty was more reliable than ideology.

In July 1979, Saddam forced al-Bakr to resign and assumed the presidency. Within days, he staged a purge that demonstrated his complete ruthlessness. He assembled Ba'ath Party leadership and read a list of sixty-six alleged conspirators supposedly planning to overthrow him. As names were called, security guards dragged individuals from the room. The remaining leadership was forced to chant loyalty slogans. Some were then required to serve on firing squads executing their former colleagues. This forced complicity ensured that survivors were implicated in the purge and could not later claim innocence. Twenty-two high-ranking Ba'ath officials were executed. Hundreds more were imprisoned or demoted. The message was unmistakable: Saddam had absolute power and would kill anyone threatening him.

Saddam built a cult of personality rivaling Stalin's Soviet Union or Kim Il-Sung's North Korea. His portrait appeared everywhere—on buildings, in offices, in homes. Streets, schools, airports, and institutions were named after him. State media portrayed him as father of the nation, brilliant leader, and Iraq's savior. Television showed him visiting villages, holding children, blessing crowds. The propaganda was relentless and unavoidable. Iraqis learned to perform enthusiasm for Saddam regardless of their private thoughts. Applauding too weakly at rallies could bring scrutiny. Not displaying his portrait prominently could suggest disloyalty.

This was the culmination of patterns established during the mandate period. The British had created a political system where power came from controlling the military and security forces rather than from popular legitimacy. They had created an oil economy where control of government meant control of enormous wealth. They had created sectarian divisions that authoritarian leaders could exploit by empowering some groups against others. Saddam mastered all these dynamics, building a totalitarian dictatorship that would rule Iraq for twenty-four years. The structures the British had created enabled this outcome even though the British would have been horrified by Saddam's regime.

XVI. The Iran-Iraq War: Destroying Two Generations (1980-1988)

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, initiating a war that would kill perhaps five hundred thousand to one million people combined across both sides, devastate both economies, and accomplish nothing. The war emerged from multiple causes: Saddam's fear that Iran's Islamic Revolution would inspire Iraq's Shia majority to revolt, his ambition to dominate the Persian Gulf, his calculation that Iran's military was weak after revolution, and his belief that Arab states and Western powers would support Iraq against revolutionary Iran. All these calculations proved wrong. The war became a catastrophic stalemate that consumed Iraq's youth and oil wealth while leaving the regime intact.

The War's Human Cost

Iraq mobilized perhaps one million men into military service during the war's eight years. Young men were conscripted, given minimal training, and sent to fight on the Iranian border. Iranian forces, driven by revolutionary fervor and willing to accept massive casualties, repelled Iraqi invasion and counterattacked into Iraqi territory. The war settled into trench warfare reminiscent of World War I—static fronts, artillery bombardments, mass infantry assaults across minefields, gas attacks, and horrific casualties.

Iraqi casualties probably reached two hundred fifty thousand to three hundred thousand dead and perhaps four hundred thousand to five hundred thousand wounded. The dead were overwhelmingly young men—eighteen to thirty years old—from working-class and rural families. Elite families used connections to avoid frontline service. Saddam's sons did not fight.

Government officials' children received safe assignments. The burden fell on those without power or connections. Villages sent their sons to war and received bodies back. Families received minimal compensation and little support. The regime built monuments to martyrs but provided scant help to widows and orphans.

Iranian missile and aircraft attacks struck Iraqi cities, killing perhaps ten thousand civilians. Baghdad, Basra, and other cities experienced bombardment that destroyed neighborhoods and infrastructure. Iraqi forces responded by bombing Iranian cities, creating mutual terror. Chemical weapons were employed systematically—Iraq used mustard gas and nerve agents against Iranian troops, causing perhaps twenty thousand Iranian casualties from gas. Iraq also used chemical weapons against Kurdish villages (discussed below), demonstrating willingness to employ these weapons against its own citizens.

For the average Iraqi family, the war meant sons and fathers absent for years, killed, or returned wounded and traumatized. It meant economic hardship as the war consumed oil revenue that might have funded development. It meant rationing of food and consumer goods. It meant constant fear of Iranian attacks. It meant living under a regime that demanded absolute loyalty and sacrifice while providing little security or support. Women became household heads when husbands died or were disabled. Children grew up without fathers. The war's psychological trauma scarred an entire generation.

Why the War Continued So Long

The war continued for eight years despite achieving nothing because Saddam could not admit defeat without risking overthrow, Iran's revolutionary government saw the war as religious struggle against Iraqi aggression and Saddam's regime, and external powers provided both sides with weapons and support prolonging the conflict. The Soviet Union supplied Iraq with weapons. France sold Iraq advanced aircraft and missiles. The United States provided intelligence to Iraq and maintained military ties. Meanwhile, Syria and Libya supported Iran. The war became proxy conflict where regional and global powers pursued their interests through Iraqi and Iranian blood.

Iraq financed the war through oil revenue and borrowing from Gulf Arab states who feared Iranian revolutionary influence. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia loaned Iraq perhaps $40 billion during the war. This debt would later contribute to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Oil prices were high in early 1980s but collapsed in mid-1980s, creating fiscal crisis. The Iraqi government cut imports, reduced subsidies, and printed money, causing inflation. Living standards declined sharply. By the war's end in 1988, Iraq was economically exhausted.

The war finally ended in August 1988 when Iran accepted a ceasefire after Iraqi military successes, Iranian exhaustion, and international pressure convinced Iranian leadership that continuing was futile. Both sides claimed victory. Neither side had won anything. The borders remained unchanged. Saddam remained in power. Iran's revolution continued. The war had been pointless waste of human life and resources serving no objective beyond leaders' egos and geopolitical maneuvering.

The Anfal Campaign: Genocide Against the Kurds

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi Kurdish groups allied with Iran against Saddam's regime, viewing the war as opportunity to weaken Baghdad and advance Kurdish autonomy. Saddam's response was genocide. Between 1986 and 1989, the Iraqi military conducted the Anfal Campaign—systematic destruction of Kurdish villages, mass executions, and chemical weapons attacks that killed perhaps fifty thousand to one hundred eighty thousand Kurds. The campaign aimed to eliminate rural Kurdish populations that supported Kurdish resistance.

The most notorious attack occurred at Halabja in March 1988 when Iraqi forces dropped chemical weapons on the Kurdish town, killing approximately five thousand people in a single day. Photographs of dead bodies in the streets—children clutching parents, families collapsed together—shocked the world. But the international community did little. The United States and European countries continued supporting Iraq against Iran. Chemical weapons use against civilians was acknowledged but excused as unfortunate excess in wartime.

The Anfal Campaign involved systematic atrocities. Iraqi forces surrounded villages, separating men from women and children. Men and adolescent boys were taken away in trucks. Most were executed—shot in mass graves, sometimes buried alive. Women, children, and elderly were transported to concentration camps in southern Iraq where many died from neglect, disease, and starvation. Approximately four thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed—homes bulldozed, agricultural land poisoned, irrigation systems destroyed. The Iraqi government wanted to make rural Kurdish areas uninhabitable.

Ali Hassan al-Majid, Saddam's cousin, commanded the Anfal Campaign and became known as "Chemical Ali" for his enthusiastic use of chemical weapons. He described his strategy in recorded conversations later used as evidence in war crimes trials: "I will kill them all with chemical weapons. Who is going to say anything? The international community? Fuck them." This was calculated genocide—systematic destruction of an ethnic group to eliminate political resistance. The campaign succeeded in destroying rural Kurdish society but failed to eliminate Kurdish nationalism, which would revive after 1991.

The Anfal Campaign traced directly to British mandate decisions. The British had forced Kurds into Iraq over their objections. They had created a state where Kurdish demands for autonomy threatened territorial integrity and oil access. Every Iraqi government faced the choice between granting Kurdish autonomy (risking state fragmentation) or suppressing Kurdish nationalism (requiring violence). Saddam chose maximal violence. The fifty thousand to one hundred eighty thousand dead represented the ultimate consequence of British imperial engineering that created an Iraqi state incompatible with Kurdish self-determination.

XVII. The Gulf War and Sanctions Catastrophe (1990-2003)

Iraq emerged from the Iran-Iraq War in August 1988 economically devastated, militarily exhausted, and burdened with $40 billion in debt to Gulf Arab states. Saddam needed to restore Iraq's economy and his regime's legitimacy. He blamed Kuwait for Iraq's economic problems, accusing Kuwait of stealing Iraqi oil through slant drilling, overproducing oil to keep prices low, and refusing to forgive Iraqi war debt. In August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, conquered the country in two days, and annexed it as Iraq's nineteenth province. This decision would prove catastrophic for Iraq and for Saddam personally, though it would take thirteen years for the consequences to fully manifest.

Operation Desert Storm and Iraq's Defeat

The international response was swift. The United Nations Security Council condemned the invasion and imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq. The United States assembled a coalition of thirty-five countries including Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. When Iraq refused to withdraw from Kuwait, the coalition launched Operation Desert Storm in January 1991—a massive air campaign followed by ground invasion that liberated Kuwait in one hundred hours and destroyed much of Iraq's military capability.

The air campaign demonstrated technological superiority that Iraq could not challenge. Coalition aircraft struck Iraq continuously for forty-three days—targeting military installations, communications infrastructure, power plants, bridges, roads, and government buildings. Iraq's air force was destroyed on the ground or fled to Iran. Iraq's air defense system was suppressed. Coalition aircraft operated freely, dropping approximately eighty-eight thousand tons of explosives on Iraq. Some strikes hit civilian infrastructure—water treatment plants, electrical generation facilities, telecommunications centers—that the coalition claimed had military value. These strikes created humanitarian crisis that would worsen during the sanctions period.

The ground campaign was a rout. Coalition forces, led by American armored divisions, swept through Iraqi defenses in Kuwait and southern Iraq, cutting off Iraqi retreat and destroying Iraqi units attempting to flee. Iraqi forces that had seemed formidable during the Iran-Iraq War proved incapable of conventional warfare against modern American military technology. Perhaps twenty-five thousand to thirty-five thousand Iraqi soldiers were killed during the hundred-hour ground campaign. Thousands more were captured. The so-called "Highway of Death"—the road from Kuwait to Basra where retreating Iraqi forces were destroyed by coalition aircraft—became iconic image of Iraqi defeat.

The coalition stopped short of Baghdad, deciding not to overthrow Saddam's regime. American President George H.W. Bush feared that occupying Iraq would be costly and that removing Saddam might fragment Iraq into sectarian and ethnic components, destabilizing the region. This proved to be accurate prediction but created situation where Saddam survived military defeat and remained in power for another twelve years. Iraqi populations would pay the price for this decision.

The Failed Uprisings and Regime Survival

As Iraqi forces retreated in defeat and Saddam's regime appeared weak, uprisings erupted across Iraq. In the south, Shia Arabs rose against the regime, seizing control of cities including Basra, Najaf, Karbala, and Nasiriyah. In the north, Kurds captured Kurdish regions and advanced toward Kirkuk. For several weeks in March 1991, Saddam's regime appeared finished. But American forces did not support the uprisings. President Bush had called on Iraqis to overthrow Saddam, but when they did, American military forces stood by as Saddam's remaining loyal units—particularly the Republican Guard divisions that had been preserved during the war—crushed the rebellions with extreme violence.

The suppression of the Shia uprising was particularly brutal. Iraqi helicopter gunships, which coalition forces could have prevented from operating under the ceasefire terms but chose not to, strafed crowds in southern cities. Tanks shelled holy sites in Najaf and Karbala. Thousands were executed in mass killings. Perhaps thirty thousand to sixty thousand Shia Arabs died in the uprising and its suppression. Thousands more disappeared into regime prisons. Mass graves across southern Iraq would later reveal the scope of killing. The regime's message was clear: resistance meant death, and no external power would protect Iraqis from their government.

The Kurdish uprising was suppressed similarly, though international intervention created a different outcome. As Iraqi forces advanced into Kurdish regions, approximately two million Kurds fled toward Turkey and Iran, creating a refugee crisis that international television broadcast globally. Images of Kurdish families dying in mountains fleeing Iraqi forces generated pressure for Western intervention. The United States, Britain, and France established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq preventing Iraqi aircraft from operating there, and created a safe haven allowing Kurds to return. This intervention saved Kurdish populations and enabled creation of de facto Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq that would persist until 2003.

The uprisings' failure demonstrated that regime change in Iraq required external military intervention. Iraqis alone could not overthrow Saddam without military support. The regime's security apparatus, military loyalty mechanisms, and willingness to employ unlimited violence against civilians made successful uprising impossible. This would be proven again in future decades.

Sanctions: Slow Death for Iraq

The United Nations imposed comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq in August 1990 and maintained them until 2003. The sanctions prohibited all trade with Iraq except limited humanitarian goods, froze Iraqi assets abroad, and prohibited most financial transactions. The stated purpose was forcing Iraq to comply with UN resolutions requiring destruction of weapons of mass destruction programs and cooperation with weapons inspectors. The actual effect was devastating Iraq's economy and causing humanitarian catastrophe that killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

The sanctions prevented Iraq from exporting oil except under limited oil-for-food program established in 1996. This meant Iraq's government revenue collapsed from $15-20 billion annually before 1990 to perhaps $3-5 billion during the 1990s. The Iraqi government could not

import food, medicine, industrial equipment, or spare parts. Iraq's infrastructure deteriorated as water treatment plants failed without replacement parts, electrical systems degraded, hospitals ran out of medicine and supplies, and industrial facilities shut down.

The humanitarian consequences were catastrophic. Infant mortality rates doubled from approximately fifty deaths per thousand live births in 1989 to over one hundred deaths per thousand by the late 1990s. Child mortality rates for children under five increased from approximately eighty per thousand to over one hundred thirty per thousand. These increases meant approximately one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand excess child deaths during the sanctions period. UNICEF studies documented children dying from malnutrition, diarrhea from contaminated water, preventable diseases, and lack of medicine. Families watched their children waste away, unable to afford food on the black market or find medicine in hospitals.

Adult malnutrition increased dramatically. Food rationing provided approximately one thousand to twelve hundred calories per person daily—below subsistence level. Families sold possessions to buy food. The middle class was destroyed—teachers, doctors, engineers, government employees saw their salaries become worthless as inflation destroyed the Iraqi dinar. A government employee's monthly salary might buy a few kilograms of rice. Professionals drove taxis or sold goods in markets to survive. Crime increased as desperate people stole to eat. Prostitution increased as women had no other way to feed their families.

The oil-for-food program established in 1996 was supposed to mitigate humanitarian suffering by allowing Iraq to sell limited oil and use revenue to purchase food and medicine under UN supervision. But the program was inadequate and corrupted. Iraq sold perhaps $60 billion in oil under the program but could not purchase sufficient food and medicine to meet needs. The program's bureaucracy delayed shipments. The Iraqi government manipulated distributions to reward supporters and punish suspect populations. UN officials and companies supplying goods to Iraq engaged in corruption, taking kickbacks and bribes. The program helped but could not reverse the humanitarian catastrophe.

International organizations including UNICEF, WHO, and various NGOs documented the sanctions' humanitarian impact. Multiple UN humanitarian coordinators resigned in protest, arguing that sanctions were killing civilians without achieving political objectives. Denis Halliday resigned in 1998 stating: "I am resigning because the policy of economic sanctions is totally bankrupt. We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that." His successor Hans von Sponeck resigned in 2000 with similar condemnation: "How long should the civilian population of Iraq be exposed to such punishment for something they have never done?"

But sanctions continued. The United States and Britain argued that Saddam's regime could end sanctions at any time by complying with UN resolutions. Iraq claimed it had destroyed weapons programs and that inspectors were intelligence agents. The impasse continued for thirteen years. Iraqi civilians suffered while Saddam's regime survived and elite families profited from

black market trade and sanctions-busting schemes. Once again, those with power protected their interests while those without power suffered.

The average Iraqi family's experience during the sanctions period was grinding impoverishment and suffering. Parents watched children become malnourished. Families boiled contaminated water because water treatment plants didn't function, then watched children develop diarrhea and die because hospitals had no medicine. Teachers worked for salaries worth a few dollars monthly. Doctors operated without anesthesia or antibiotics. Engineers watched infrastructure they had built deteriorate. The professional class emigrated when possible—perhaps two to three million Iraqis left during the 1990s, creating brain drain. Those who remained endured conditions that seemed designed to break them.

This was not unforeseen consequence but predictable outcome. Economic sanctions that prevent food and medicine imports while targeting government that hoards resources and doesn't care about its population will inevitably harm civilians more than leadership. The sanctions succeeded in keeping Saddam weak and contained but failed to remove him. The cost was paid by Iraqis who had no voice in their government's decisions and no power to change them.

XVIII. The American Invasion and State Collapse (2003-2011)

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States created political climate in America for aggressive military action against perceived threats. Despite Iraq having no connection to the attacks, the Bush administration targeted Saddam's regime, claiming Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and posed imminent threat to American security. These claims proved false—Iraq had destroyed its WMD programs in the 1990s under UN oversight. But American determination to remove Saddam was not based on accurate intelligence but on decision to reshape the Middle East through regime change.

Invasion and the Regime's Collapse

American and British forces invaded Iraq in March 2003 with approximately one hundred seventy thousand troops. The invasion was conventional military campaign where American technological superiority gave overwhelming advantage. Iraqi forces offered limited resistance. Some units fought briefly before retreating or dissolving. Others simply abandoned positions. By April 9, 2003—three weeks after invasion began—American forces entered Baghdad and Saddam's regime collapsed. Saddam fled into hiding (captured in December 2003). His sons Uday and Qusay were killed by American forces in July 2003. The Ba'athist state that had ruled Iraq for thirty-five years disintegrated in days.

The speed of military victory masked the catastrophe that would follow. American planning assumed that removing Saddam would allow Iraqi society to transition quickly to democracy. This assumption was disastrously wrong. Iraq had been governed by authoritarian regimes for eight decades. Its population was divided along sectarian and ethnic lines that British mandate engineering had institutionalized and that Ba'athist rule had deepened through favoritism and repression. Its economy was dysfunctional after thirteen years of sanctions. Its institutions were corrupt and weak. Its neighbors had interests in shaping post-invasion outcomes. Simply removing the regime without addressing these structural problems guaranteed chaos.

Occupation and De-Ba'athification

American occupation authority made two decisions that transformed Iraq's politics permanently. First, they dissolved the Iraqi Army completely in May 2003, putting approximately four hundred thousand soldiers and officers out of work. These men had weapons, military training, and no livelihood. Many joined insurgency against American occupation. This decision eliminated the institution that might have maintained order and created vast pool of armed, angry men with every incentive to resist.

Second, they implemented comprehensive de-Ba'athification removing anyone with senior Ba'ath Party membership from government employment. This policy, intended to prevent Ba'athists from regaining power, instead removed perhaps thirty thousand to eighty thousand experienced administrators, managers, engineers, and teachers from government service. The Iraqi state lost institutional memory and administrative capacity overnight. The policy disproportionately affected Sunni Arabs who had dominated Ba'athist government, creating Sunni Arab grievance and marginalizing the community that had ruled Iraq since 1921.

These policies, combined with looting and infrastructure collapse that followed regime fall, created vacuum that sectarian and ethnic factions rushed to fill. Shia Arab parties that had opposed Saddam from exile returned with Iranian backing, organizing militias and competing for power. Kurdish parties consolidated control over northern Iraq. Sunni Arab groups, suddenly marginalized after eight decades of dominance, organized insurgency against occupation and against Shia empowerment.

Sectarian Civil War (2006-2008)

The sectarian tensions that the British had institutionalized during the mandate period and that had been suppressed through authoritarian violence under the monarchy and Ba'athist rule erupted into civil war. Shia militias, particularly the Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr and the Badr Organization backed by Iran, attacked Sunni Arab neighborhoods in Baghdad and mixed areas. Sunni insurgent groups including Al-Qaeda in Iraq attacked Shia civilians with car bombs and suicide attacks. Mixed neighborhoods were ethnically cleansed—families were murdered, forced to flee, or driven out by threats. Perhaps two hundred thousand Iraqis died during 2006-2008 in sectarian violence.

The civil war's geography revealed the mandate's legacy. Baghdad, which had been mixed Sunni-Shia city, divided into sectarian enclaves as neighborhoods were cleansed. The Sunni Arab-dominated western provinces of Anbar, Saladin, and Nineveh became insurgent strongholds. The Shia-dominated south fell under militia control. Kurdish regions remained stable under Kurdish governance but asserted increasing autonomy. The Iraqi state that the British had created, combining these populations within single political entity, had fragmented into sectarian and ethnic components warring against each other.

American forces, attempting to prevent complete state collapse, implemented the "surge" strategy in 2007-2008, deploying additional troops and paying Sunni tribal leaders to switch sides and fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This "Anbar Awakening" reduced violence but did not address underlying sectarian divisions or create genuine national reconciliation. When American forces withdrew in 2011, the fundamental problems—Sunni Arab marginalization, Shia domination of government, Kurdish autonomy, weak institutions, sectarian militias, Iranian influence—all remained.

For average Iraqis, the 2003-2011 period brought unprecedented violence and suffering. Families experienced bombings, shootings, kidnappings, and ethnic cleansing. Perhaps five hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand Iraqis died violently during 2003-2011. Perhaps four to five million were displaced—fleeing neighborhoods, cities, or the country entirely. Basic services collapsed as sectarian conflict prevented reconstruction. Electricity operated perhaps four to eight hours daily. Water quality remained dangerous. Garbage piled in streets. Schools and hospitals barely functioned. The sanctions period had been grinding poverty; the occupation period was violent chaos.

The American invasion destroyed what remained of Iraqi state institutions without building sustainable replacements. Democracy was imposed through elections that reflected sectarian divisions rather than ideological differences. Political parties organized along sectarian lines—Shia parties, Sunni parties, Kurdish parties—competing for power and resources. Government ministries became sectarian fiefdoms distributing jobs and contracts to co-religionists. Corruption reached levels that made the Ba'athist era seem modest—reconstruction funds disappeared, oil revenue was stolen, government contracts enriched officials and their relatives. Iraq became a kleptocracy where political power meant access to theft.

XIX. ISIS, Continued Instability, and Present Conditions (2011-2025)

The Rise of ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged from the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, feeding on Sunni Arab grievance at marginalization by the Shia-dominated government. Prime

Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), a Shia Arab backed by Iran, pursued policies that excluded Sunni Arabs from power, arrested Sunni politicians, and used security forces to repress Sunni protests. In 2014, ISIS launched offensive from Syria, capturing Mosul (Iraq's second-largest city with nearly two million inhabitants), Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, and large territories across western and northern Iraq.

The Iraqi Army collapsed in the face of ISIS advance. Units numbering fifty thousand troops fled Mosul when perhaps fifteen hundred ISIS fighters attacked. This collapse revealed that the Iraqi Army was hollow institution—soldiers weren't paid regularly, officers were corrupt, sectarian divisions meant Sunni soldiers wouldn't fight for Shia government. The army that American forces had spent billions training and equipping dissolved because it had no legitimacy or cohesion.

ISIS proclaimed a caliphate in June 2014 and imposed brutal totalitarian rule over territories containing perhaps eight to ten million people. Public executions, beheadings, amputations, sexual slavery, and systematic destruction of religious minorities defined ISIS governance. The Yazidi religious minority faced genocide—ISIS killed perhaps five thousand Yazidi men and enslaved perhaps seven thousand Yazidi women and children. Ancient Christian communities that had survived for nearly two thousand years fled or were destroyed. ISIS's brutality shocked even by Iraq's standards.

The war to defeat ISIS required massive international intervention. American forces returned to Iraq, launching air strikes and deploying special forces. Iranian-backed Shia militias became Iraq's primary ground force. Kurdish peshmerga forces defended and eventually expanded Kurdish territory. The campaign lasted from 2014 to 2017, killing perhaps fifty thousand to eighty thousand ISIS fighters and perhaps thirty thousand to fifty thousand civilians caught in fighting. Cities including Mosul and Ramadi were destroyed through bombing and urban combat. By late 2017, ISIS had lost all territory and reverted to insurgent organization conducting terrorist attacks.

The ISIS episode revealed the Iraqi state's fundamental weakness. Seventy years after the monarchy's overthrow and sixty-three years after the Ba'athist rise, Iraq still could not field a loyal, effective military or govern its territory without external support. The sectarian divisions the British had institutionalized during the mandate period remained the primary political cleavage. The Sunni Arab community's grievance at lost power dating to 2003 had enabled ISIS's rise. The Iraqi state existed juridically but not functionally.

2025 Conditions: Chronic Dysfunction

As of 2025, Iraq remains dysfunctional state characterized by corruption, sectarian division, Iranian influence, periodic violence, and failure to deliver basic services. The statistics suggest moderate development: GDP per capita approximates $6,000, literacy reaches seventy-five to eighty percent, life expectancy is seventy-one years. These numbers represent improvement from sanctions period and war years. But they obscure the lived reality for most Iraqis.

Political institutions remain captured by sectarian parties distributing patronage to supporters. Elections occur but change little—the same political class rotates through positions, accumulating wealth through corruption while providing minimal governance. Government formation takes months or years after elections as sectarian parties negotiate power-sharing arrangements. Once formed, governments accomplish little beyond enriching officials. Transparency International ranks Iraq among the world's most corrupt countries.

Basic services remain inadequate. Baghdad receives perhaps ten to sixteen hours of electricity daily—better than the four to eight hours during peak violence but far below needs. Water quality remains poor—many Iraqis must purchase bottled water because tap water is contaminated. Garbage collection is irregular. Roads deteriorate. Schools lack resources. Hospitals function poorly. Internet service is unreliable. For all Iraq's oil wealth, the state cannot provide services that middle-income countries take for granted.

Oil revenue—approximately $80-100 billion annually in recent years—should fund substantial development. Instead, perhaps thirty to fifty percent disappears through corruption. Political parties control ministries and distribute jobs to supporters regardless of qualifications. Construction projects are awarded to politically-connected contractors who inflate costs and deliver substandard work. Oil production itself is inefficient—Iraqi oil fields could produce much more with proper investment, but corruption and mismanagement limit output and waste resources.

Youth unemployment exceeds twenty-five percent, creating generation with limited economic prospects. Young Iraqis, particularly in Shia-dominated south, have repeatedly protested demanding jobs, services, and end to corruption. The 2019-2020 protests brought hundreds of thousands into streets in Baghdad, Basra, and other cities. The government and Iranian-backed militias responded with violence—over six hundred protesters were killed, thousands were wounded. The protests eventually subsided, having achieved minimal change. The cycle continues—grievances accumulate, protests erupt, violence suppresses them, and underlying problems persist.

Iranian influence permeates Iraqi politics and security. Iranian-backed Shia militias, collectively known as Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), number perhaps one hundred fifty thousand fighters and operate semi-independently from Iraqi government control. These militias sometimes act as Iranian proxy forces, attacking American interests and threatening Iraqi sovereignty. The Iraqi government cannot disarm or control them because they are politically powerful and militarily strong. Iraq's sovereignty is nominal—major decisions require Iranian approval and Shia politicians make pilgrimages to Tehran to consult Iranian leaders.

Sunni Arab communities remain marginalized and resentful. The areas devastated by ISIS war have been partially rebuilt but remain impoverished. Sunni Arabs view the Shia-dominated government as illegitimate and Iraqi state as Shia-Persian project rather than genuinely national institution. Kurdish regions maintain de facto independence, with their own government, military forces, and oil export arrangements. The Kurdistan Regional Government controls northern Iraq including disputed territories like Kirkuk that Baghdad claims. Kurdish independence aspirations

remain strong despite 2017 referendum being rejected by Iraqi government and international community.

For the average Iraqi in 2025, life means navigating dysfunctional state institutions, coping with inadequate services, seeking employment in a stagnant economy, and hoping to avoid violence that could erupt at any time. Those with connections to political parties or militias do better—they get government jobs, access to services, and protection. Those without connections struggle—working informal sector jobs, bribing officials for basic services, emigrating if possible. Iraq produces millions of university graduates who cannot find employment matching their qualifications. Many drive taxis, sell goods in markets, or leave for Gulf countries where wages are higher.

Women's status has deteriorated since 2003. Under Ba'athist rule, Iraq was one of the more secular Arab states—women attended universities, worked as professionals, and participated in public life with relative freedom despite regime brutality. After 2003, sectarian parties promoted conservative social norms. Militias enforced dress codes. Honor killings increased. Women face pressure to marry young and focus on domestic roles. The relative freedom that educated urban women had experienced under secularist dictatorships has given way to more restrictive conditions under sectarian democracy.

Iraq's demographic trajectory suggests future problems. Population has grown from approximately five million in 1950 to over forty-three million in 2025. This growth strains resources, particularly water. Climate change and upstream dam construction in Turkey and Iran reduce water flow in the Tigris and Euphrates, threatening agriculture. Southern Iraq faces severe water shortages. Basra's water is so saline from Persian Gulf intrusion that it's barely potable. The Iraqi government lacks capacity to address these challenges. Future water crises could trigger internal conflicts and mass displacement.

XX. Synthesis: Mandate Engineering and Iraq's Trajectory

Tracing Iraq from British mandate through 2025 reveals how imperial engineering created structural problems that proved impossible to overcome through reform and generated cycles of authoritarianism, violence, and state failure.

The Boundaries Question

The British combined three Ottoman provinces containing Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Kurds, and smaller minorities into a single state serving British strategic interests. This decision created permanent instability. The Kurdish question has generated six major wars, the Anfal genocide, and ongoing conflict. Sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia Arabs have structured Iraqi politics for a century, erupting into civil war when authoritarian control weakened. An Iraqi state that respected ethnic and sectarian realities—whether through partition, genuine federalism, or

different boundaries—might have proven more stable. But the British drew boundaries to control oil and maintain imperial communications, not to create viable polity.

The Minority Rule Legacy

The British empowered a Sunni Arab minority to dominate government, military, and administration. This minority rule lasted from 1921 to 2003—eighty-two years. Shia Arabs, constituting the majority, remained excluded and alienated. When American invasion overthrew this system, Shia empowerment was inevitable. But decades of marginalization meant Shia parties pursued sectarian agendas rather than national reconciliation. Sunni Arabs, suddenly losing power they had held for eight decades, viewed their exclusion as injustice and supported resistance including ISIS. A different mandate policy—creating inclusive institutions from the start, ensuring proportional representation, preventing sectarian discrimination—might have avoided this pattern. But the British chose to empower a minority dependent on their backing, ensuring continued British influence at the cost of permanent sectarian conflict.

The Military's Political Role

The British created an Iraqi military commanded by Sunni Arab officers, organized for internal control rather than external defense, and accustomed to political involvement. This military conducted the first coup in 1936 and continued intervening until 2003. The pattern was established early: when civilian government failed to serve military interests or when officers believed they could govern better, they seized power through force. The military culture valued strength, decisiveness, and national glory over democratic processes or civilian control. This culture enabled Saddam's rise and made military authoritarianism the default mode of governance. Creating a genuinely apolitical, professionally oriented military subordinate to civilian authority would have required different institutional design from the start.

The Oil Curse

British oil concession arrangements funneled Iraq's resource wealth to foreign companies. After nationalization in 1972, oil wealth went to Iraqi government but created pathologies the British had enabled. Controlling government meant controlling enormous revenue. This made political power worth fighting for—coups, violence, and repression were rational strategies when winning meant accessing billions. Oil wealth also enabled authoritarian regimes to buy loyalty, fund security apparatus, and ignore economic development beyond resource extraction. Countries without oil must develop productive economies to generate revenue. Oil exporters can ignore productivity and simply extract rents. This is why resource-rich countries often have worse governance than resource-poor ones. The British created this dynamic by structuring oil concessions to serve foreign companies rather than Iraqi development. Different arrangements—requiring oil revenue be invested in development, distributed to citizens, or held in sovereign wealth funds—might have avoided the curse.

The Institutional Weakness

The Iraqi state has never developed strong, autonomous institutions capable of delivering services, enforcing laws fairly, or commanding popular legitimacy. This traces to British mandate engineering that created institutions designed for extraction and control rather than governance and service delivery. Post-independence governments inherited weak institutions and never invested in strengthening them because strong institutions would constrain elite predation. After 2003, institution-building failed because sectarian parties captured ministries for patronage distribution. At every stage, elites prioritized short-term power and wealth extraction over long-term institutional development. This pattern began with British creation of extractive colonial institutions.

What Would Have Been Required for Different Outcomes

Different Iraqi trajectories were possible but required choices that actors with power refused to make:

During mandate period (1921-1932): Genuine development investment, inclusive institutions preventing sectarian discrimination, land reform before landlord power solidified, education for entire population, oil revenue dedicated to development, creation of professional apolitical military, and transfer of real sovereignty at independence. The British chose extraction over development, minority rule over inclusion, and elite empowerment over popular welfare.

During monarchy period (1932-1958): Land reform breaking landlord power, progressive taxation funding universal education and healthcare, oil revenue invested in diversified economic development, constitutional reforms ensuring Shia and Kurdish representation, and military professionalization preventing coups. The Iraqi elite chose to preserve their wealth and power rather than risk reform that might empower lower classes.

During Ba'athist period (1958-2003): Genuine federalism accommodating Kurdish autonomy, sectarian power-sharing preventing minority domination, economic development beyond oil extraction, and avoidance of catastrophic wars. The Ba'athist regime chose totalitarian control, military aggression, and elite enrichment.

After 2003: Inclusive government respecting all communities, professional administration beyond sectarian patronage, investment of oil revenue in development rather than corruption, and genuine reconciliation between Sunni, Shia, and Kurds. Iraqi sectarian parties and militias chose to divide spoils and marginalize rivals.

At each juncture, those with power chose immediate benefits over long-term development. This was rational individual calculation but collectively catastrophic. The British created initial conditions making these outcomes likely—weak institutions, sectarian divisions, extractive economy, politicized military. Each subsequent regime faced structural constraints limiting options. The past weighed on the present, making different choices difficult even when actors recognized problems.

The Human Cost: Four Generations of Suffering

Quantifying Iraq's human cost is impossible with precision but the scale is clear. The 1920 revolt killed ten thousand. The mandate period's various suppressions killed perhaps five thousand more. The 1958 revolution and subsequent coups killed thousands. The Ba'athist purges and political repression killed perhaps one hundred thousand across thirty-five years. The Iran-Iraq War killed three hundred thousand Iraqis. The Gulf War and subsequent uprisings killed perhaps seventy thousand. Sanctions killed perhaps two hundred thousand children through malnutrition and preventable disease. The 2003 invasion and occupation killed five hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand. The ISIS war killed perhaps eighty thousand to one hundred thousand. Sectarian violence, terrorism, and state repression across the decades killed countless more.

Conservatively, perhaps 1.5 to 2 million Iraqis have died violently or from conflict-related causes since 1920. This is approximately five to seven percent of Iraq's current population. In a country of forty-three million, virtually every family has lost members to violence. Multiple generations have lived through war, dictatorship, sanctions, occupation, and civil war. The psychological trauma is incalculable. The economic cost—infrastructure destroyed repeatedly, development prevented, capital flight, brain drain—has kept Iraq poor despite massive oil wealth.

The mandate engineering's ultimate legacy is this ocean of suffering. The British created a state that could not govern justly, could not defend itself without violence against its own people, and could not develop despite resource wealth. Every subsequent regime failed to overcome the structural problems the British had embedded. Those who suffered most were always the same—the peasant working land they didn't own, the worker seeking employment, the merchant trying to sustain a business, the student aspiring to better life, the mother watching her children go hungry, the father unable to protect his family from violence.

XXI. Conclusion: The Mandate's Century-Long Shadow

Iraq in 2025 is a dysfunctional state struggling with corruption, sectarian division, violence, foreign interference, and inability to deliver basic services despite massive oil wealth. This condition traces directly to British mandate engineering in the 1920s and to the structures that engineering created.

The British drew boundaries combining incompatible populations to serve imperial interests in oil and strategic position. They empowered a minority to rule the majority, ensuring dependence on British backing. They created a politicized military that would seize power repeatedly. They structured oil concessions to enrich foreign companies rather than develop Iraq. They invested minimally in education, health, and infrastructure. They built institutions for extraction and control rather than governance and service delivery. They transferred nominal independence while preserving real control through treaties and continued influence.

These choices created path dependencies that proved impossible to overcome. The monarchy inherited British structures and maintained them to preserve elite power. The Ba'ath Party

destroyed the monarchy but built an even more oppressive authoritarianism exploiting the same sectarian divisions and political weaknesses. The American invasion destroyed the Ba'athist state but empowered sectarian parties that captured institutions for patronage and corruption. At each regime change, hope emerged that this time would be different. Each time, structural problems reasserted themselves.

What would have been required for Iraq to develop as a stable, prosperous state? At minimum: boundaries respecting ethnic and sectarian realities or genuinely inclusive institutions transcending sectarian identity; land reform creating broad-based agricultural economy; oil wealth invested in development rather than captured by elites; universal education creating informed citizenry; strong autonomous institutions delivering services and enforcing laws fairly; professional apolitical military subordinate to civilian authority; and genuine sovereignty allowing Iraqis to make decisions serving Iraqi interests.

None of this occurred because at every decision point, those with power chose to preserve their advantages rather than risk reform. The British prioritized imperial interests. The monarchy prioritized elite wealth. The Ba'ath Party prioritized totalitarian control. American occupiers prioritized quick exit. Sectarian parties prioritized communal power. At each stage, the choice was between short-term elite benefits and long-term national development. Elite benefits won every time.

The lesson is not that Iraqis are incapable of self-governance or that Iraqi culture prevents democracy. The lesson is that imperial engineering can create structural conditions that make good governance nearly impossible. The British built Iraq to serve British interests, not Iraqi welfare. That foundation shaped everything that followed. Different imperial policies—genuine development investment, inclusive institutions, equitable resource management, real sovereignty transfer—might have created different outcomes. But the British chose extraction over development, and Iraq has paid the price for a century.

For the average Iraqi in 2025, the mandate period ended ninety-three years ago. But its consequences shape their daily life. The sectarian divisions that the British institutionalized structure their politics. The oil wealth that the British arranged to enrich foreign companies creates corruption rather than development. The weak institutions that the British built for control rather than service fail to deliver basic necessities. The boundaries that the British drew for imperial convenience contain populations that never achieved genuine national unity. The minority domination that the British established created grievances that exploded into civil war when that domination ended.

Iraq's trajectory from British creation through present dysfunction demonstrates that state formation matters enormously. How states are constructed, whose interests they serve, what institutions they develop, and what boundaries they encompass shape possibilities for generations. The British created Iraq badly—cynically, exploitatively, with minimal concern for Iraqi welfare and maximum concern for British strategic interests. Iraqis have struggled with that legacy ever since. Some overcame it through individual achievement. Most have simply endured it, suffering through the violence and deprivation that structural dysfunction generates.

Understanding this history doesn't excuse the violence that Iraqis have inflicted on each other or absolve Iraqi leaders of responsibility for their choices. But it explains why reform has failed repeatedly, why revolution has produced chaos rather than justice, and why oil wealth has generated conflict rather than prosperity. The British mandate period was not ancient history with no contemporary relevance. It was state engineering that created conditions persisting to the present, shaping Iraq's chronic instability and condemning multiple generations to unnecessary suffering.

This was not inevitable. Different choices—British choices in the 1920s, Iraqi elite choices in the decades that followed, American choices in 2003—could have created better outcomes. The tragedy is that better outcomes were possible but never realized because those with power to choose did not prioritize the welfare of average people who would bear the consequences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources and Documents

- British Government Documents, National Archives (Kew):
    - Colonial Office Files (CO) relating to Iraq, 1918-1932
    - Foreign Office Files (FO) relating to Iraq and Middle East policy
    - Cabinet Papers and War Cabinet minutes
    - League of Nations Mandate Commission Reports and Proceedings
- Published Document Collections:
    - Busch, Briton Cooper, ed. *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1894-1914* (1967)
    - Hurewitz, J.C. *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record* (1956)
    - Kedourie, Elie. *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921* (1956)

General Histories of Iraq

- Batatu, Hanna. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (1978)
- Cleveland, William L. and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East* (6th ed., 2016)
- Dodge, Toby. *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (2003)
- Farouk-Sluglett, Marion and Peter Sluglett. *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (1987)
- Marr, Phebe. *The Modern History of Iraq* (4th ed., 2017)
- Tripp, Charles. *A History of Iraq* (3rd ed., 2007)

British Mandate Period

- Eppel, Michael. *Iraq from Monarchy to Tyranny: From the Hashemites to the Rise of Saddam* (2004)
- Fromkin, David. *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (1989)
- Ireland, Philip Willard. *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (1937)
- Kedourie, Elie. *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle-Eastern Studies* (1970)
- Longrigg, Stephen H. *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A Political, Social and Economic History* (1953)
- Sluglett, Peter. *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (1976)
- Vinogradov, Amal. *The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered* (1972)
- Wilson, Arnold T. *Mesopotamia, 1917-1920: A Clash of Loyalties* (1931)
- Bell, Gertrude. *The Letters of Gertrude Bell* (1927)

Oil and Economic History

- Alnasrawi, Abbas. *The Economy of Iraq: Oil, Wars, Destruction of Development and Prospects, 1950-2010* (1994)
- Fieldhouse, D.K. *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958* (2006)
- Mejcher, Helmut. *Imperial Quest for Oil: Iraq, 1910-1928* (1976)
- Stork, Joe. *Middle East Oil and the Energy Crisis* (1975)
- Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (1991)

Land Tenure and Rural Society

- Batatu, Hanna. "Class Analysis and Iraqi Society" (1979)
- Fernea, Robert A. *Shaykh and Effendi: Changing Patterns of Authority among the El Shabana of Southern Iraq* (1970)
- Haider, Salah A. *Land Problems of Iraq* (1942)
- al-Khafaji, Isam. *State Incubation of Iraqi Capitalism* (1983)

Military and Political Development

- Bengio, Ofra. *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (1998)
- Khadduri, Majid. *Independent Iraq, 1932-1958: A Study in Iraqi Politics* (1960)
- Khadduri, Majid. *Republican Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics Since the Revolution of 1958* (1969)
- Makiya, Kanan. *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (1989)
- Tarbush, Mohammad A. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941* (1982)

Iran-Iraq War

- Chubin, Shahram and Charles Tripp. *Iran and Iraq at War* (1988)

- Hiro, Dilip. *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (1991)
- Karsh, Efraim. *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (2002)
- Pelletiere, Stephen C. *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (1992)

Kurdish Question

- Gunter, Michael M. *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (1999)
- McDowall, David. *A Modern History of the Kurds* (3rd ed., 2004)
- Natali, Denise. *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (2005)
- Yildiz, Kerim. *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future* (2007)

Gulf War and Sanctions

- Arnove, Anthony, ed. *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War* (2000)
- Gordon, Joy. *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (2010)
- Graham-Brown, Sarah. *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (1999)
- Simons, Geoff. *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice* (1998)

2003 Invasion and Occupation

- Allawi, Ali A. *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (2007)
- Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (2006)
- Cockburn, Patrick. *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq* (2006)
- Dodge, Toby. *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (2012)
- Galbraith, Peter W. *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (2006)
- Packer, George. *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (2005)
- Ricks, Thomas E. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006)

Sectarian Conflict and ISIS

- Cockburn, Patrick. *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (2015)
- Haddad, Fanar. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (2011)
- Hashim, Ahmed S. *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (2006)
- Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (2015)
- Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (2015)

Memoirs and Eyewitness Accounts

- Makiya, Kanan. *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (1993)
- Al-Khalil, Samir (Kanan Makiya). *Republic of Fear: The Inside Story of Saddam's Iraq* (1989)

- Coughlin, Con. *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (2002)

Human Rights and Atrocities

- Human Rights Watch. *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (1993)
- Human Rights Watch. *The Mass Graves of al-Mahawil: The Truth Uncovered* (2003)
- Middle East Watch. *Human Rights in Iraq* (1990)

Theoretical and Comparative

- Anderson, Lisa. *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (1986)
- Ayubi, Nazih N. *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (1995)
- Beblawi, Hazem and Giacomo Luciani, eds. *The Rentier State* (1987)
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (2011)
- Owen, Roger. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (3rd ed., 2004)

*****Copyright and Licensing*****

© 2026 Thomas J. Bryan

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

*****You are free to:*****
- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material

*****Under the following terms:*****
- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes

This case study is part of the collection *Patterns of Power: Systematic Analysis of Elite Control Mechanisms Across Civilizations*